

FIVE CENTS

BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No. 43

MAT, THE FUGITIVE
or The Witch Doctor's Prophecy



BY JOHN H. WHITSON

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MAT, THE FUGITIVE;

OR,

The Witch-Doctor's Prophecy.

By JOHN H. WHITSON.

CHAPTER I.

UNDER THE LION'S PAW.

"Hi there!" yelled the lion-tamer. "Scatter! scatter for your lives!"

A scent of sawdust was in the air, circles of lights gleamed about the center-poles, and a babal of sounds came from the ring of cages in Renfro's Circus.

With a roar that was deep-toned and cavernous, a black-maned jungle-king hurled his tawny form through the door of a cage, and leaped, sprawling, into the arena, where he squatted for an instant, blinking his yellow eyes at the glittering lights.

How he had managed to escape from the cage could not be certainly known, at that moment, and no one stopped to inquire. Every one bounded from the vicinity, each thinking the lion at his heels.

Then the roar echoed again, with tenfold its former fury, and, with a tremendous bound, the lion sprang toward the group of trembling horses.

The macaw's and parrots screamed, the monkeys chattered in terror, the elephants trumpeted their fear and anger!

A man barred the lion's path, though this man was doing his level best to put a safe distance between himself and the enraged beast.

The lion swerved, struck the man to the earth, placed a heavy paw on his breast, then glared about in an attitude of defiance.

The lion-tamer had deserted his post, the employees were shrieking and panic-stricken, and the prostrate and unfortunate individual beneath the lion's paw was apparently left to his fate.

At this moment, a light form darted across the arena, straight toward the defiant lion.

It was the form of a boy, who was somewhat shabbily clad, and in whose appearance there was a certain something that betokened familiarity with the sea. There was a pallor on his face, though his flashing and determined look evinced anything but cowardice.

The boy was resolved to save the life of the man, if he could and he knew that his attempt was fraught with a grave peril.

He opened his lips, as he ran, and, taking off his hat, flung it full in the lion's face.

A roar greeted this audacious assault, the lion's jaws distended, and the gleaming white teeth were cruelly revealed. The king of beasts was puzzled by the very boldness of the youth.

But he did not leave the man, who lay on his back, with eyes closed, as if dead.

Fearing to approach nearer, the boy scooped up a double handful of sawdust, made a quick rush, and hurled it in a cloud into the lion's eyes.

The lion, maddened and blinded, gave utterance to a scream of deep rage, and leaped in the direction of his tormentor. The sawdust so filled his eyes, however, that instead of catching the boy, he brought up with thundering force against the center-pole, which the boy was now climbing with monkeylike agility.

That the boy was possessed of the training of a seaman was shown by the skill and ease with which he mounted the mast-like pole. He had had this center-pole in mind, as a place of refuge,

when he rushed with such recklessness to the help of the fallen stranger.

The lion was rolling over and over, and tearing at the earth, in an endeavor to free his eyes of the sawdust, uttering roar upon roar, and in his frantic efforts might have been viewed with laughter, if the situation had not been so serious.

When the youth had ascended twelve or fifteen feet, he stopped with his arms and legs twined about the pole, and looked down at the screaming beast.

He also glanced toward the man he had tried to aid, knowing that in a second or two the lion would again be in condition to do murderous work.

The man who had been knocked breathless, but who was not much injured, was scrambling to his feet.

"Run for your life!" the boy yelled.

The man gave a scared glance in that direction, and comprehending the need of haste, leaped to his feet, and rushed, hatless, away.

There was a trailing rope reaching down the side of the pole to the ground, and this the boy grasped, and shook and dangled before the lion's nose, to distract his attention from the fleeing man.

Maddened beyond measure, the lion glared upward with bloody eyes, and sprang at the pole with insane fury.

"Whoop it up!" the boy yelled, still shaking the rope. "Come and see me! That's what I like! Give us another song!"

The lion sprang again, falling backward in a sprawling heap, then began to circle slowly about the pole, as if looking for a place by which he might mount.

"Coo ee! Come an' see yer uncle!" the boy shouted. "You ain't no good on earth! I don't believe you can climb worth shucks!"

The trembling horses had rushed from the place, the trumpeting elephants had backed away, but the monkeys and parrots, cooped in their cages, were still screaming their fright.

Heads were peeping through slits in the canvas in various places, and a few men were trying to summon courage to return.

Prof. Leonto, the lion-tamer, was of the latter number. He felt he had disgraced himself by running from the lion.

"Why don't you shoot the brute?" the boy loudly questioned, when he saw the lion-tamer thrust his head into view.

The heavy center-pole had swayed like a stricken oak, under the force of the lion's leap; and the boy, in spite of his show of bravado, quailed, as he watched the big brute pace slowly around the pole looking for a favorable point of attack.

He knew that an untoward incident or accident might toss him to the earth, which would mean nothing less than his instant death.

The boy was trembling, too, and a reacting feeling of weakness and giddiness possessed him.

Another had appeared beside that of the lion-tamer. It was the head of the man whose life the youth had saved.

He pushed through the aperture, a big revolver in his right hand.

"Don't shoot him!" Prof. Leonto requested. "I think we can get him back into the cage. He's a valuable beast, and it will cost me my position if he is harmed. Wait here a moment!"

The lion-tamer was regaining his nerve.

He disappeared, but was back again in a second, bearing a keen-lashed lion whip and a long iron rod, with a red-hot tip, which he had plucked from a furnace. He held the whip in his muscular right hand, and the rod in his left.

"Draw his attention, will you?" he said to the boy clinging to the pole.

"Whoop! Whoop! Coo ee! Come up here and get your uncle!" the boy obediently yelled, shaking a clinched fist at the lion and sliding up and down the pole with surprising nimbleness. "You can't climb worth shucks, you can't! Come up here! Come up here!"

The ruse was not successful. The lion, whose attention had been momentarily attracted by the appearance of the men, gave his entire heed again to the boy, and recommenced his circling of the center-pole.

Taking advantage of this, Prof. Leonto slipped crouchingly forward, holding the rod and whip in readiness.

The lion-tamer was not radiant in spangles and tights, for it lacked an hour yet of the beginning of the evening's performance. He wore the ordinary clothing of the workingman, and the sleeves of his red-flannel shirt were rolled up to his elbows. To his associates and when off duty, "Prof. Leonto, the Great Lion King," was only plain Sam Jackson.

But he was usually a brave man, whether in tights or in ordinary attire, and only the fierceness of the lion's spring, which had come so unexpectedly, had thrown him off his guard and filled him with panicky fear.

Feeling that he must redeem himself and drive the lion into the cage, he crept with stealthy movements near to the big beast, whose eyes were fixed on the boy.

Then, with a quick spring, he thrust the point of the hot rod into one of the lion's ears.

A roar of surprise and pain rolled from the lion's throat. He turned savagely on Leonto, with such wide-open, vindictive jaws that the lion-tamer's hours on earth seemed numbered.

But Leonto had all the agility of a professional athlete. He evaded the lion's rush; and then the blows of the lion whip fell in a stinging shower.

"Into the cage, there!" Leonto commanded, his voice hoarse and savage. "You, Scipio! Into that cage!"

The pain cowed the lion, and he retreated before this fierce onslaught.

The man who had felt the lion's paw, followed, not far away, with the big revolver held in readiness. It was quite plain that he meant to shoot if the lion tried to break from the tamer.

Heads of frightened employees were visible here and there, but none ventured within. They did not wish to put themselves in peril, and they knew that the lion-tamer could get along better without them.

Like rain fell the blows of the heavy whip, interjected and emphasized by constant proddings with the hot iron.

In vain the lion tried to break past the tamer. The whip and the iron hemmed him like a circle of fire; till, whimpering and subdued, he was driven into the cage, and the bolt of the door shot into place behind him.

Then the scared circus men swarmed back, the parrots and monkeys screamed and squawked triumphantly, and the courageous youth, who had dared to face the lion at the moment of the beast's most violent wrath, slipped lightly down the pole that had so well served him.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNGRATEFUL RETURN.

"I feel as weak as a cat, after that!" said the boy, smiling bravely into the faces that gathered about him.

He was trembling violently, and his freckled face was bathed in perspiration.

He was fifteen or sixteen years of age, with a pleasant look, blue-gray eyes, and brown hair that was now tangled into a shock.

One of the men brought him his hat.

The man he had so signally assisted bustled forward. The big revolver was now out of sight, and the man was feeling in a hip pocket for his purse. His coat and shirt were slightly torn, but he seemed not to have received any serious injury.

"That was a brave trick," he declared, "and I owe you something for it!"

He ostentatiously drew out the purse.

"If you please, sir, I'd rather have work, and a place I could call home!"

The man looked at him, fixedly.

"Out of a job, eh? Well, I am Capt. Lee Bolton, of the schooner *Southern Cross*, now lying in the basin; and perhaps I can give you something to do."

The boy's face brightened. He was familiar with such work as would probably be required of him on board the *Southern Cross*. He was now friendless and alone in New Orleans, whither he had recently come in a logwood ship from Honduras.

An hour or two before, he had applied to the boss canvasman for a situation. He had not been given regular work, but had been set to doing odd jobs to pay for his supper, which accounts for his presence beneath the menagerie tent.

Some business transaction had drawn Capt. Lee Bolton to the same place—a meeting and an acquaintance strangely begun, and which was destined to have strange results.

Fifteen minutes later, when matters were again quiet under Renfro's canvas, Capt. Lee Bolton, and the boy, who had simply given his name as Mat, set out together for the basin in which the *Southern Cross* was lying.

When it was gained, the boy was introduced to the schooner's cook, who was instructed to give him something to eat.

"I don't believe I'll ever get filled up!" Mat declared, looking with interest at the many charcoal boats that crowded the basin. "I think I'm hollow to my toes. Had a good supper to-night, too!"

The cook, who was black as ebony, showed his teeth in a grin. "You always fin' plenty to eat, wherevah you fin' Marse Bolton!"

Thereupon he got out a dish of steaming hot beans, a number of biscuits, and some coffee; and the boy fell to with as much vim as if he had had nothing to eat for a fortnight.

"Your name is Mat, eh? Mat what?"

The boy started. The words had been spoken by Capt. Bolton, and he did not know that the captain was anywhere near.

When he put down the half-uplifted biscuit and looked at Bolton he saw that the latter was intently eyeing him.

Capt. Lee Bolton, of the *Southern Cross*, was a man of forty or forty-five, with a tanned and weather-beaten face and an expression of countenance that was not prepossessing. There was something foxy in his attitude, as he sat there gazing at the boy. Mat had already noticed the craftiness that lurked in the captain's eye.

This quickened interest shown by the captain was a little singular, inasmuch as he had evinced scant curiosity concerning the boy's name and history during the walk to the schooner.

"Matio Ducro!" was the reply given to Bolton's question.

A slight shade passed over Bolton's face, and a sudden glint of fire shone behind the purple of his dark eyes.

"Rather an uncommon name, that!"

"Spanish, I believe," said Mat, again taking up the biscuit. "It would be Matthew Ducro, in English."

The captain turned aside his face to hide the queer light that lay revealed in his countenance.

"Where born?" he asked.

"Louisiana."

Bolton got up and thrust his hands into his coat pockets.

"Looks like rain, Tom," he said to the cook, suddenly changing the subject. "We must get out of here as quick as we can; and there's a lot of rope, which I forgot, that must be brought aboard, right away. You can help with the rope?"

The question was directed to Mat.

"Certainly, sir!" the boy replied, shoving back from the table.

As he got up from his chair he stumbled across the captain's foot, falling heavily.

It was an awkward accident—if it was an accident.

Bolton was at his side instantly, and lifted him to his feet, with many apologies.

"I didn't mean to trip you! Not hurt, eh?"

"Not at all!" confusedly flushing and brushing the dirt from his knees.

"That's good. You fell hard enough to break bones. Next time be a little more careful, and watch what you're doing!"

"Tom, let me see you a bit. We must get up that rope."

The captain turned away, followed instantly by the cook, and Mat heard them whispering together on the deck.

"It's going to rain," Bolton called down to him. "Come along and help us get that rope; and then we'll have a tug pull us through the canal. I want to get out on Pontchartrain as soon as I can!"

As there had been, so far, nothing to arouse Mat's suspicion that affairs were not as they should be, he complied with unquestioning obedience; and, a little later, the three were in the street and hurrying toward the heart of the city.

When under the full glare of a lamp, the captain threw himself with a sudden impetuosity on Mat, bearing him to the earth.

"Lend a hand, Tom!" he commanded; and when Mat Ducro overcame with fright and bewilderment, ceased to struggle, the captain lifted his voice in a call for the police.

One of these blue-coated gentry was just across the way at the moment, and had been sighted by Bolton at the instant of the attack. This policeman was already hurrying toward the struggling group.

"What's the row?" he demanded, as he came puffing up, swinging his club.

"Summon more help," Bolton requested; while the negro cook lifted the bewildered boy to his feet. "This young chap's a thief! I thought to do a good turn by him, and he has robbed me!"

Mat Ducro's brain spun like a top, under the influence of the unexpected accusation.

"That's a lie!" he gasped.

Bolton lifted a hand as if to strike him in the face.

"No rowing!" the policeman adjured. "We'll get the boy to the station, and you can have your quarrel out there!"

Thereupon, he sent in a call for the patrol wagon, and when it arrived Mat was bundled into it, the policeman and Capt. Bolton accompanying him.

So confident was Mat in his innocence, and so sure that he could not be held on this absurd charge, that he went along willingly enough.

He was flushing, though, with anger and humiliation, and cudgeling his brain for some reason that could have caused the change in the captain's attitude.

What had he done to bring down on his head the captain's sudden wrath and enmity? He recalled the queer look the captain had bent on him, while questioning him in the schooner, but that explained nothing. The fact that his name was Matio Ducro, and that the place of his birth was in Louisiana, could not be urged against him.

Sure that he would not be held for any great length of time on the captain's unsupported testimony, he was willing and anxious to face the officials; but he was sorely hurt by the loss of the captain's confidence, and by the thought that the position he fancied his would now be withheld from him.

This last meant a great deal to the homeless boy, who was such a stranger in the Crescent City.

Dismounting from the patrol wagon, and marching into the station, Mat walked between the policeman and Bolton with a firm step, though his heart was quaking with ill-concealed fear.

"I offered this boy work on my vessel, and the first thing he did was to rob me!" was Bolton's statement, when called on to define his charges against Mat.

The officer in whose presence they stood was a little man, in blue uniform, and with a surprisingly bald head, and who peered at Mat inquisitively over gold-rimmed glasses.

"What do you say to the gentleman's statement?" he questioned.

"That it isn't true!" and Mat drew himself up boldly. "I wasn't on his schooner but a few minutes, and couldn't have had a chance to steal, if I had wanted to. I'm no thief, sir!"

Capt. Lee Bolton smiled incredulously, and gave the blue-coated officer a peculiar nod.

"Search the boy, Williamson!"

This was addressed to the officer who had brought Mat in, and who now proceeded to go through Mat's pockets with much celerity.

A worn jackknife, some cords and matches were fished out, and then Williamson breathed hard, as his fingers closed on something in one of Mat's coat pockets.

"Ah!" he said; "what's this?"

Mat paled with sudden terror.

He had not known there was anything in that pocket.

The blue-coated official peered over his glasses, and Capt. Lee Bolton smiled triumphantly.

Williamson's hand came out of the coat pocket, and in it there was a roll of bills.

Mat stood in stupefied and speechless amazement when he beheld the money in the policeman's hand.

"I—I don't know how that came there!" he gasped. "I'm sure it wasn't—I'm sure I didn't—"

"Pretty positive proof!" and the spectacled officer looked at him unmercifully.

"I knew he had that money in his pocket!" said Bolton. "I saw him take it from the safe, and, for fear he might hide it somewhere, I ordered him to come ashore with me after some rope."

Then the captain proceeded to tell a prettily concocted story, which left no doubt in the mind of the officer that the boy before him was one of the most hardened of young criminals.

Mat Ducro was shaking with fear. He realized that he was being made the victim of some deep plot, whose reason he could not even conjecture.

All he could do was to deny, with bitter emphasis, the account given by Bolton, and to protest and re-protest his innocence.

But he was only wasting his breath. No one in the room believed him. All saw in him a hardened and reckless criminal, who was determined to brave through his case as best he could.

Mat's name and age were taken, together with the charge against him, and then, as he had no friend who could become his bondsman, he was ordered off to a cell.

CHAPTER III.

MAT BECOMES A FUGITIVE.

Mat Ducro sank into the depths of despondency when the cell door closed on him, and he found himself in impenetrable darkness.

The light from the guard's lantern had shown him a little cot near the wall, and to this he stumbled, and sinking down on it, put his hands to his face and gave vent to his feelings in a burst of tears.

It was not Mat Ducro's nature to do much crying. He had too long battled with the world, and had suffered too many ups and downs of fortune. But this was worse than perils and hardships—worse than privation and hunger, heat and cold.

He had always prided himself on his honesty. And here he was in a felon's cell, with no means of clearing his name of the stigma put upon it.

What had already occurred showed him that conviction was as certain to follow on the heels of accusation as the night follows the day.

And this from the hands of a stranger whose life he had saved.

What did it all mean? Why should Capt. Lee Bolton treat him in that manner?

He had scarcely been given time for thought, and had been bewildered by the finding of the money in his pocket. He believed now that it had been placed there when Bolton assisted him to rise to his feet on the schooner.

If that were so, then Bolton had purposely tripped him, seeking an opportunity to put the bills where they would be found by the police.

It was but a link in the visible chain of evidence. What lay back of it? What was the meaning of the enmeshing net that now wound him about?

The guard's light flashed again in the corridor, and looking up, Mat saw the guard returning, accompanied by a portly gentleman.

Not until they were in front of the door of his cell, however, was he sure that this visit was meant for him.

The cell door was unlocked and pushed open, the guard's lantern was deposited on the floor, and the portly gentleman entered, unaccompanied.

Mat looked at him, with hopeful questioning, and got up from the cot.

"Sit down; I want to talk to you a little while. I am a lawyer, and hearing that you were without friends or money, I came to volunteer my services. Therefore, you may speak to me freely, and we'll talk of what's best to be done."

He was smooth-faced as well as portly, and as he sank to a seat beside the boy, a bland smile lighted his features, and he rubbed his fat chin with a very pudgy hand.

Mat Ducro could have hugged him, so great was the joy which his coming brought. To find a friend in that dark hour was a thing calling for gratitude.

And Mat expressed his pleasure in broken sentences, and dashed away the tears, and smiled back into the bland face of the portly man in a way that was most ecstatic.

"But, indeed, I'm not guilty!" he declared. "I never saw that roll of money until the policeman pulled it out of my pocket. I am sure Capt. Bolton put it there—for a purpose!"

"A very improbable statement!" said the lawyer, the bland smile changing into a severe look.

The lawyer was already familiar with the charges against Mat, and seemed inclined to think them true.

Mat flushed under his gaze.

"Better speak the truth, and tell me all about it," the lawyer declared, coaxingly. "As your attorney, you will see that I ought to know the whole truth. I can't promise to help you otherwise!"

Mat persisted in his statement, and then went on to tell how he had chanced to meet the captain of the *Southern Cross*, and how he had saved the captain's life, insisting that these facts could be proved.

"It will not help you to prove those things!" and the lawyer again caressed his fat chin, though the smile had faded from his eyes.

"Then you do not believe my story?" Mat demanded.

"That portion of it, yes! But when you ask me to believe that Capt. Bolton put the money into your pocket, just to have the policeman find it there, you are asking a little too much, young man, as you ought to know!"

The hope with which Mat had witnessed the lawyer's entrance was dashed to the earth. Anger and a sense of injustice had come in its place.

"You say you came here to help me. What would you have me do?"

The lawyer's glance wavered as Mat looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Now you are coming to the point. There is nothing for you to do but to confess your guilt and throw yourself on the mercy of the judge. If you do that, you will probably get a light sentence. If you don't—"

"If I don't—what?"

"You will get from ten to fifteen years in the State's prison!"

In spite of his endeavor to be brave, the youth's heart sank.

He was lost for a moment in thought. When he looked up, he declared, with flashing eyes:

"No matter what the penalty may be, sir, I'll never confess to doing something of which I am innocent. I suppose I ought to thank you for coming here, but I can't do what you ask me to do."

"Very well!" and the lawyer arose from the cot. "You will find, when it is too late, that you are making a mistake. Go your own way, if you prefer a long sentence to a light one!"

He gave the floor a stamp, and in answer, the guard bustled forward with a jingling bunch of keys.

Then the cell door was unlocked, and the lawyer passed into the corridor and out of sight.

As the guard turned away, after twisting the key in the lock, and while the light of his lantern still flooded the cell, Mat Ducro saw that the bolt had not properly slipped into place; that the door was not securely locked.

A wild desire to escape instantly leaped into the mind of the boy.

"I wonder if that was done on purpose to get me into another trap?" was his thought, as he advanced toward the door.

The light of the guard's lantern was fading.

Mat took hold of the cell door, pushed it gently, and discovered that it moved noiselessly on its hinges.

A little thought convinced him that it had not been purposely left unlocked.

He tried to recall the windings of the corridor, and remembered that it led past the room below, where he had been interviewed and searched, and from thence to an outer gate.

This outer gate stood in a yard, which was girt about by high brick walls. If he could get into the yard, he might not be able to scale the walls, even if he could escape the vigilance of the officers who usually loitered there.

His heart was hammering against the walls of his chest, and his breath came chokingly.

He disliked to take advantage of the opportunity thus providentially given, but at the same time he was not willing to spend the best years of his youth and manhood in prison for a crime he had not committed.

The course already pursued by Lee Bolton told him what further he might expect from that source.

"I'll make a try of it, anyhow!" he gasped, as he ran his fingers over the cold bars. "If they catch me, I shan't be any worse off than I am now. This will make them sure I'm guilty, but they're sure of it already."

When he had listened attentively, and could hear no sound, he quietly opened the cell door and slipped out into the corridor.

Remembering his shoes, he removed them, and, bearing them in his hand, he moved on in his stocking feet, almost holding his breath, and making not a sound.

He heard voices from the room below, and saw that a fan of light fell through a transom into the corridor.

Feeling that there was not a moment to be lost, he scudded softly down the stairway, ran crouching past the door of the room, and turned into the wide hall that opened into the yard.

He had not been seen, and his hopes increased.

Here he stopped for a moment in the shadow of a tall column, and peered ahead. A big policeman was walking toward him, as if along a beat.

Soon the policeman turned about to retrace his way, and when his back was to the building, Mat slipped from the shadow of the column, leaped across the paved court, and hurried into an angle of the wall.

The wall towered above him far beyond his reach, but there was a tree in the yard, whose expanded branches invitingly beckoned.

Mat squatted in the shadows to replace his shoes, and the policeman turned again toward him. But the guardian of the law was not overly vigilant, and Mat, in the shadows, was not seen.

Again the policeman turned about, and Mat began to work his way up the body of the tree, climbing the trunk as rapidly as he had climbed the center-pole of the circus.

When he was amid the branches, he crept along one toward the high wall, and there paused to look around.

He could see for long distances up and down the street, which was fairly well lighted. There were many pedestrians, but none was looking in his direction. The policeman was at the farther end of his beat.

Mat swung from the limb and dropped with a thud into the street.

The bent bough swung back into place with a loud rustling, thus drawing the policeman's attention, and instantly there came the "rat-tat-tat" of his club, followed by a piercing whistle and the loud clangor of an alarm bell.

Mat's escape had been discovered.

"I'm a goner if they catch me now!" the boy gasped, and then he heard the patter of hurrying feet, as the aroused officers rushed to the gate.

CHAPTER IV.

MAT FINDS A FRIEND.

Mat Ducro was quick of foot, and before the big gate flew open, letting the officers into the street, he succeeded in gaining a dark alley, which opened invitingly not more than half a block away.

Into this alley Mat leaped, hurrying onward as fast as his legs would carry him.

He knew the police would search that alley almost immediately, and he chose it only because he feared the lights of the streets.

He was in the French quarter of the city, and as soon as he could he headed at his best gait in the direction of the French Market and the levee.

He saw, though, that the hour was too early for him to hope to escape by mere running. The news of his escape would be flashed all over the city, and policemen would be on the lookout for him at every corner.

So, when he had run another block, and felt for a moment secure, he began to cast about as to what he should do.

There was a warehouse near, with a projecting shed roof, and a big heap of cotton bales.

Scrambling hastily to the top of the cotton bales, Mat climbed to the roof, over which he ran, seeking for a place of concealment.

There was none, but an iron fire-escape clung to a big building. Impelled by a feeling of desperation, after a short run over the roof, the hunted boy hurled himself at this fire-escape, and succeeded in grasping it.

Here he hung for a moment, to regain his strength, and then climbed rapidly toward the top of the high building.

"There he is!" was yelled from the street, and Mat saw that he had been discovered.

The glare of an electric light made his position as plain as day.

Mat cringed, expecting to hear the crack of a revolver, and to feel the bullet tear his flesh.

But the shot did not come.

On the contrary, the cries of the man were echoed by others, and a crowd began to collect, toward which a number of policemen were racing.

The clammy sweat oozed out on the boy's forehead, but he gathered his energies and climbed on with a speed and desperation that carried him upward with surprising rapidity.

Then, having gained the roof, he threw his arm around a small brick flue, and swung himself over, where he lay for an instant, panting and exhausted.

"I'm not safe yet!" he thought. "They'll be up here in a little while!"

He felt so weak he could hardly rise.

Nevertheless, he struggled to his feet, and peered over the edge of the roof.

A crowd had gathered on the street beneath the fire-escape, and again those cries arose, as Mat's head became for a moment visible.

He took courage, though, when he saw that no one was yet climbing toward the top of the building.

Then, feeling that he dared not tarry there longer, he hurried on, springing from one roof to another.

The houses were built close against each other, and the roofs were nearly of a uniform height, so that, for a time, he found but little difficulty.

Then he came to a place which baffled him.

From the roof on which he stood to the next was a sheer descent of ten or fifteen feet. He feared to leap down, and he was puzzled to know how he was to get up the opposite wall, whose roof was as high as the one he was on, even if he succeeded in making the descent.

The place seemingly presented an impassable chasm, and Mat was in despair.

Then he caught sight of a twisted lightning-rod, and after hurrying to it, and inspecting it closely, he began to work down the face of the wall by clinging to this rod with his hands and digging the toes of his shoes against the bricks.

When he had accomplished the descent, he found a gallery

which led over the street, and by climbing one of the poles of this gallery, he obtained a foothold on another roof.

He was beginning to feel secure, and when he had crossed a number of roofs and had turned and twisted in a manner to defy the keenest pursuer, he began to look about for a place of hiding.

There was nothing of the sort in view, and he again hurried on, driven by his fears.

While creeping cautiously along near a place that looked like the closed hatch of a vessel, he felt a hand grasp one of his feet.

Mat turned about, with a smothered exclamation.

The door in the roof—for it was a door—had been slipped open, and a dark, boyish face looked at him.

There was a smile on the face, and a twinkle in the black eyes.

Mat jerked his foot away.

"I saw you coming," the boy avowed. "The electric showed you! Running away from the police, eh? Same boat as I'm in. Crawl down here. It's a reg'lar cuddy."

Mat hesitated, not knowing if it would be safe to comply with this request.

"I'm tipping it to you straight," the boy urged, seeing Mat's indecision. "I've been in here all evening, and it's getting lonesome. It's a jolly place to hide in. You'll not find a better 'round here!"

Mat hesitated no longer. There was such an air of perfect candor in the boy's manner that he could not disbelieve him.

"All right, then, I'll climb in. Make room for me there!"

The black eyes smiled again. Then the door was shoved farther over, and Mat dropped in at the boy's side.

CHAPTER V.

IN HIDING.

The trapdoor was pulled into place, and the gloom that immediately fell about Mat Ducro was stygian.

"Dark as a stack of black cats in here!" came in the voice of the boy. "But you'll get used to it d'rectly. It's tolerably light, though, at the other end of the attic. We'll go over there and peek out."

"Who are you, and what are you hiding for?" Mat ventured to ask.

"The cops got after me," the boy confessed. "A fellow struck me on the street, and I knocked him down, and then the cops chased me. I was just thinking of crawling out, when I heard you coming, and when I saw you under the electric, I says to myself: 'There's another chap running from the police!' Then you passed me, and I slipped open the door and pulled your foot."

"Been fighting, too, eh? Well, you bet! When a fellow gives me any sass and punches at me, I always punch back. You've got to hold your own, or be eternally stepped on!"

There was an air of self-assertion and independence in the tones, though not of bravado.

They had reached the little window, which was dirty and cobwebbed, and by the feeble light that struggled through it Mat surveyed his companion.

He saw before him a boy of about his own age, but somewhat better dressed, and who looked well-fed, and as if he had lived an indolent and easy life.

The boy's face was dark, and his hair quite black.

The boy noticed the scrutinizing glance.

"My name is Phil Darrow, and I guess you'd call me a gypsy," he confessed. "Anyway, I'm half gypsy, and a fellow might as well be hung for a sheep as for a goat. My folks are camped out

here near the edge of the marsh. How long will you have to lie close, do you think? We might slip out there!"

This was so direct an invitation to confession that Mat at once told him why he had been running from the police, and something of his personal history.

"Well, that's interesting. There's some mystery back of that! What kind of a fellow is this Lee Bolton?"

Mat gave a minute description of the captain of the *Southern Cross*.

Phil Darrow shook his head.

"Don't know him. He's no good, though, to treat you that way! And after you risked your life for him in the circus!"

He clasped Mat's hand and drew him toward a dingy little window, some distance away.

He scraped away some of the dirt from a pane, and peered through.

"Take a peep. Not an interesting view, but you can see a little, and that's better than not seeing at all."

Mat saw a couple of chimneys and a section of a big wall.

"Is there any other way of getting out of here?"

"There's a door," answered the gypsy boy. "It's locked, though, and I don't know where it leads to. Come this way, and I'll show it to you."

The door seemed not to have been opened in a long time.

"Oh, I guess we're safe enough here," Darrow declared. "I don't think any one ever comes up here."

The correctness of this was shown by the dust which lay thick on the floor, and by the cobwebs that festooned the walls.

Now that his excitement had spent itself, and he felt safe, Mat Ducro began to realize how tired he was.

He dropped down, with his back against the door, feeling that he did not want to stir again for a month, and Phil, squatting in the dust at his side, began to talk of the gypsy camp on the edge of the marsh, and of his wanderings.

"I should think it would be more fun to be a sailor, though. I know I'd prefer a ship to a wagon."

"Not much fun on shipboard," Mat asserted. "It's all very well in stories, where everything goes just as it ought to go, but when you tackle the real thing, it's a dog's life. You don't get any more to eat than you ought to have, and you've got to work like a slave, and you're sworn at by every one, from the captain down."

"I'd never set foot on a ship again, if there was anything else I could do. But that's about all I know. I was born in Louisiana, and lived here in New Orleans when I was too small to remember anything, but it seems to me I've been on the sea all my life."

Mat was becoming drowsy, and when he had yawned a few times, and found he could not hold his attention to the rattling talk of the gypsy boy, he pulled together some rags which he found in the corner, and lay down on them.

In five minutes he was fast asleep.

After wandering restlessly about for half an hour, Phil Darrow stretched himself beside his new acquaintance.

They were awakened by the newsboys calling the first edition of the morning dailies:

"Here's your *Picayune*! Here's your *Times-Democrat*!"

The cries arose plainly through the rattle and bang of the heavy wagons.

It was still quite dark outside, and Phil announced his intention of slipping down for one of the papers.

When he came back, which he did in a few minutes, he brought a paper, together with a loaf of bread and a bottle of water.

"Seeing that your case is so serious, I thought I'd better get

these things," showing the loaf and the water bottle. "There's something about you in the paper, and I reckon we'd better hold up here till night. Then we'll make tracks for the marsh."

"What is it?" and Mat plucked the paper from Phil's hand.

"I don't know. I just heard the newsboys calling it."

Mat turned the pages with trembling fingers.

Then he came to a column which was headed by his name in big, black letters.

MATIO DUCRO'S MASQUERADE!

A CLEVER CAPTURE, AND A DARING ESCAPE!

The Young Highwayman Who Has Been Holding Up Citizens of New Orleans Caught in a New Rôle!

These were the sensational and ominous headlines that caught Mat's eye. He trembled as he read them.

"Painting you pretty black, eh?" Phil questioned, looking over Mat's shoulder and striving to pick out the words by the dim light that fell through the dirty panes of the window.

Mat found it impossible to read the column-long account that followed, though he strained his eyes till they ached.

"I don't know what they mean by calling me a highwayman, who has been holding up people!"

He put the paper down till the light should become better, and turned to Phil.

"Oh, those newspaper fellows always make things out as big as they can. They have to do that to sell the papers."

Mat found the explanation, however, when he was able to read the account.

Capt. Lee Bolton had poured a terrible tale into the ears of the eager reporters; and a policeman, professing to recognize a notorious highwayman in the description given of Mat, the reporters had sharpened their pencils and produced a most marvelous story.

Mat read the terrible accusations with a sense of horror and fear.

He saw how cunningly he was infolded in the net of false evidence, and how perilous was his situation.

Again and again he asked himself, as he read the words of the reporters, what he had done to bring these charges against him. In what way had he so offended Lee Bolton?

He could only tread around and around in a circle of conjecture and uncertainty.

All he knew was that he was a fugitive, falsely accused, and feeling forced to fly from the officers of the law.

He had little enough appetite for the bread that Phil Darrow urged on him.

"We'll get out of here as soon as it is dark," said Phil, in a hopeful tone. "You'll be safe at the gypsy camp. They'll never think of looking for you there!"

The stanch friendship of the young gypsy was a grateful thing to the heart of the hunted boy.

Until nearly sunset, they felt they were quite safe there in the attic. Then steps were heard on the stairway below, and two men entered the room just below the attic.

Mat Ducro started up with a low cry, when he caught their voices.

One of the men was the lawyer who had visited him in the cell, and the other was Lee Bolton!

CHAPTER VI.

A BIT OF PUZZLING TALK.

Phil Darrow's hand fell on Mat's shoulder.

"Steady, there!" he whispered. "Don't let them hear you. Do you know 'em?"

Mat tremblingly sank to the floor.

"It's Bolton and the lawyer!"

The gypsy boy blew out his breath in a noiseless whistle.

"Crickey! 'tis, eh?"

"Do you s'pose they're after me?" Mat queried.

"Not a bit of it! Keep still, and we'll find what they're up to!"

This was such sage advice that Mat Ducro sprawled himself softly on the floor in a listening attitude.

The voices of the men below reached them with considerable distinctness.

"So this is one of your offices, is it?" Lee Bolton was saying.

"Not a very fancy one for a cove like you!"

"It will answer. I'm not here very often, you know."

"Only when you want to have a private talk with a man of my character."

The captain's words held a sneer.

"We'll not quarrel, Capt. Bolton. We came up here to talk about that boy."

Phil Darrow gave Mat a triumphant pinch.

"He's gone, and it's all your fault!" Bolton angrily asserted.

"Do you think I left the cell door open?" in a purring, conciliatory tone.

"It looks like it!"

"Well, I didn't! Why should I want to do such a thing?"

"If he'll only leave the country, and never come back, it's the best thing that could have happened!" Bolton growled, dropping heavily into a chair. "I thought him dead long ago, and here he has turned up to trouble me. I should never have known him but for his name!"

All fear of the men below had vanished from Mat's mind. He was listening breathlessly. A hope grew that something would be said to clear up the mystery surrounding him, and reveal the secrets of the past.

It was plain that Lee Bolton knew more of that past than he himself did. It was equally plain that the lawyer was a rascally assistant of the schooner captain, who had been sent to the cell to drive Mat into a confession.

"Where has he been all these years?" the attorney inquired.

"Ask me something easy, Dutton! He told me he had come in a logwood ship from Honduras. It's strange that he should turn up now to frighten me, when I thought everything was secure."

"There can't be any mistake in the boy?"

"There ain't many Matio Ducros. Then, he's the very image of old Ignatio. I didn't notice it at first, but he's got the same eyes and hair, and the same freckled, tanned face. Oh, I'm not mistaken in the boy, Dutton."

"The police are watching for him everywhere?"

"All over the city," said Bolton. "I offered five hundred dollars reward for his capture this morning. I hope no one will get it, though. If I can scare him out of the country—give him such a scare that he'll never come back—it will be even better than putting him in prison."

"Yes, I don't know but it will."

"How much do I owe you, Dutton?" came the next inquiry, and the boys heard the jingle of coin on a table.

"How much is it worth to you to have the boy remain away?" Dutton calmly asked.

"That's got nothing to do with it. Here's a hundred. That's more than I agreed on."

Dutton was heard to grumble at the small payment, and again came the sound of jingling coins.

The listeners were wrought to a fever of excitement.

"It gets me how he got out of the jail!" Lee Bolton continued. "Do you suppose the guard helped him?"

Both were reasonably certain that Matio Ducro had no money with which to bribe the guard, and the question could not be satisfactorily answered.

Mat and Phil crushed their ears against the dusty floor, that no part of the conversation might escape them, and Bolton and the lawyer continued to talk, and to speculate on the manner of Mat's escape from the jail, and on his probable course of action, now that he was free.

They were agreed that Mat would hasten to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the minions of the law, and in the shortest space of time.

And this was exceedingly gratifying to Lee Bolton, as was plainly apparent.

Then there was some mysterious talk of lands and houses, stocks and bonds, plantations and servants, which the boys understood no more than if it had been Greek.

Capt. Lee Bolton was a very wealthy man, to judge by what was said, and by the tone in which he sometimes addressed the lawyer.

Mat Ducro had changed his position slightly, and was crouching on his knees in a listening attitude, and trying to determine within himself whether or not it would be wise to remain in the town and boldly face Bolton's accusations.

He had about decided that such a course could not profit him, when a loud peal of shrill, cackling laughter caused him to start violently and half fall to the floor.

There could be no doubt he had made some noise in this involuntary movement, and a new feeling of fear smote him.

"What was that?" Mat gasped, clutching the gypsy boy by the arm.

"'Sh! I'm afraid they heard you. Don't move nor speak! It was that blasted parrot!"

The boys had heard the parrot at intervals during the day, but the sound had never been so near.

As they listened breathlessly, they were made aware that the laughter of the parrot and the noise of Mat's movement had been caught by the two men.

"It's only Mrs. Maginnis' parrot," Dutton was heard to say. "I find him up here nearly every time I come. He's always roving around."

"But that other?" Bolton questioned.

"Are you sure you heard anything else?"

"Dead sure—and it was just overhead."

The boys stared questioningly at each other in the feeble light. They feared they were about to be discovered.

"Then it was only a rat," came Dutton's reassuring reply.

"I thought we were going to have to slide," Phil Darrow whispered, breathing easier. "I should hate to make a break before it gets dark."

The door of the office below was heard to open, and Bolton's words told that he had come out into the corridor.

Then he was heard mounting the rickety stairway.

"You are fooling away your time," Dutton called after him. "That attic door is locked, and there's nothing in it."

Nevertheless, Lee Bolton came straight on, determined to investigate the matter and satisfy himself.

The captain of the *Southern Cross* was no fool. To his mind,

what he had heard had not sounded like the leap of a rat, and he remembered that Mat Ducro, when last seen, was climbing toward the top of a tall building not far distant from that place.

What was more natural than that the boy should have taken refuge in the attic, inferring, of course, that he could gain entrance to it?"

As has been shown, Lee Bolton was intensely afraid of Mat. He would freely have killed the boy if he could have got him in his power and been assured that the crime would never be revealed.

He felt that it was not safe, therefore, to take any chances.

Mat and Phil feared to rise to their feet, but they turned their eyes toward the trapdoor, intending to make a dash for it should Bolton succeed in entering the attic.

The intervening distance was considerable, however, and the trapdoor was set tightly in its place.

On gaining the upper landing, Lee Bolton saw the parrot perched on the stairway railing, eying him inquisitively.

The sight of the bird angered him, and he knocked it from its position.

Then his heavy hand fell on the knob of the door.

The boys quaked when they heard and saw the knob turn slowly under the pressure of his fingers.

"Lie low!" Phil Darrow whispered. "The door is locked, and he'll go away in a second."

But the gypsy boy was mistaken in this estimate of the captain's character.

Without a word of warning, the captain thrust his broad shoulders against the panels, gave a mighty surge, and the door flew inward. It struck heavily against the boys, and Lee Bolton, losing his balance, sprawled on the floor.

The cloud of dust that arose choked and blinded him, but even in the semi-gloom he saw the boyish forms before him, and grasped Mat with a strong and detaining hand.

"Help! Help!" he roared. "I've got him, Dutton! I've got the rat!"

CHAPTER VII.

IN CRAMPED QUARTERS.

Mat Ducro struggled desperately in the grasp of Lee Bolton. Imprisonment, and things even worse, stared him in the face, and he was resolved not to be taken.

Capt. Bolton was not in the best position for a struggle, as he still lay sprawling on the floor, but he, nevertheless, clung with tenacious grip to Mat Ducro, and continued to roar loudly for Dutton.

Phil Darrow was considerably startled by what had occurred, and for a moment he hesitated, seeming undecided whether to fly toward the trapdoor or to rush to Mat's assistance.

Then he heard Dutton rush into the corridor, and his fears for his new chum drove away every vestige of cowardice.

He leaped straight at Bolton, who was attempting to rise, and grabbing him by the heels, jerked the captain backward, so that he lay panting and helpless on his stomach.

"Help! help!" Bolton howled. "Come here, Dutton, quick!"

But the puffy lawyer was not made of fighting material.

Instead of hastening upstairs, he ran as fast as his legs would carry him to the telephone in the corner of the office, and began to bawl for the police.

Phil Darrow gave the heels of the captain another yank, to prevent him from rising, and Mat managed to slip out of his grasp.

Then Mat, prompted by the boldness of the young gypsy, threw himself on Bolton.

The struggle that ensued was of an exciting character.

"Hold him down!" cried Phil, giving the heels still another jerk.

Then the gypsy ran, with quick steps, to the rag pile on which the boys had slept. He was back in an instant, bringing some rope, which he had noticed among the rags.

"Hold him down while I tie him!" he urged. "Don't let him up!"

Lee Bolton was boiling with rage. To be thus set upon and overcome by two boys, one of whom he had thought to capture, infuriated him beyond measure.

He endeavored to get at his pistol, or a knife, and fought with fierce energy, and at the same time cursed Dutton for a consummate idiot and coward.

His legs threshed like flails when Phil Darrow attempted to get the rope about them, and but for a bit of cunning, Phil would not have succeeded in his efforts.

Phil knew a thing or two, though, and making a hasty slip-noose, he tossed it over the flailing feet and then drew it tight.

Mat Ducro was almost exhausted in his struggle with Bolton, and could not have held out much longer.

"The deuce take you!" Bolton hissed, trying to strike Mat with his fist.

But the captain of the *Southern Cross* was in the toils, being rendered almost helpless by the rope around his feet.

This rope was now securely held in place by a knot, and its severed end—a yard or more in length—was in the hands of the young gypsy for further use.

"Don't let him strike you!" was Phil's warning.

A second later, Phil caught the hand in another noose, and, almost before he was aware of it, Capt. Lee Bolton was bound so fast and tight that he could do nothing but moan and curse.

At this instant, all were made aware of the fact that the frantic efforts of the puffy lawyer were not to prove fruitless.

A policeman's whistle sounded, and the feet of men were heard on the stair and in the street.

"Let's get out of this!" urged Mat, drawing away from Bolton.

"K'rect! Bolt's the word!"

As he said it, Phil Darrow leaped toward the trapdoor, followed quickly by Mat.

The voice of the captain rose loudly, requesting the policemen to hasten.

The gypsy boy reached the trapdoor, held it aside, and crawled through, then pushed it farther, to give Mat free egress.

They found the night descending about them as they stood on the roof, and already the electric lights were shining in long rows down the street.

Plainly it would not be safe to venture to descend, and they looked across the flat roofs of the buildings.

A short ladder lay not far away, which, apparently, had not lately been used.

To this ladder Phil hurried, and hoisted it against the nearest wall, as if he meant to climb to that roof.

"I'm afraid we'll be caught if we go that way," was Mat's assertion.

"Not going that way," was the hasty rejoinder.

They could now hear the officers on the upper stairway, and knew that the attic would be entered in an instant.

Phil, whose wits were as clear as if no danger threatened, leaped back to the trapdoor and turned a big wooden button, which served to hold the door in place from the outside. Then he whispered:

"This way, quick!"

Turning straight away from the deceptively hoisted ladder, he hurried toward a wide-throated chimney.

"We're going down into this," he said. "Let me help you. It's the only safe place. They won't think of looking in the chimney."

Mat saw the shrewdness of the gypsy boy's plan, and climbed agilely to the top of the chimney.

Slipping down into the sooty hole, he was immediately followed by Phil Darrow, and when they had descended a few feet, they settled themselves as comfortably as possible, stopping their descent by bracing with their backs and knees.

The choking soot flew about them in a blinding cloud, and the gypsy boy, who was nearest the surface, saw it go whirling out of the flue in a telltale spiral. He could only trust that the gathering darkness would keep it from being seen, and that by keeping quiet, no more would rise.

"Thump away!" he muttered, under his breath, as a heavy jolt was given to the trapdoor. "That's a good, stout button, and you'll have to ram it hard!"

Luckily, there was no fire in the rooms below to scorch the boys or suffocate them with smoke.

Another thump was heard, and the trapdoor flew from its place, clattering heavily on the roof.

Then came the voice of Capt. Bolton, and that of another, who was supposedly an officer. Dutton also made his presence known by a question.

Capt. Bolton, smarting under a sense of humiliation and defeat, was roundly denouncing the boys to the policeman, and informing him that one of the young rascals was Ducro, the escaped highwayman.

As soon as they gained the roof, they beheld the ladder, and feeling sure the fugitives had escaped in that direction, they hurried toward it, not stopping for a closer search.

Dutton, however, who was too heavy for such slippery climbing, remained on the roof near the trapdoor.

Capt. Bolton and the officer hastened away over the adjacent roof, but in less than five minutes they came back.

"They must have climbed down into the street," the officer was saying. "But I don't think they can get away. You're sure one of them was the chap that got out of the jail last night?"

"Quite sure," replied Bolton. "And he's a desperate rascal. I suppose he had it in for me for offering that reward. Anyway, he tried to kill me. If you want to earn five hundred dollars, land him in the jail again!"

"Easier said than done," was the panting reply. "From what I've heard, he can run and climb like a cat. But the boys will be on the lookout for him, and I don't think he can get out of the city."

Then the baffled trio descended through the trapdoor into the attic, and the boys in the chimney began to breathe easier.

Phil peered out at the dark sky above, and began to think of trying to extricate himself from his cramped and uncomfortable position.

Then, strangely enough, as it seemed, they heard a door open, and again there sounded the voices of their late pursuers.

The policeman had apparently gone, for his voice was not heard, and Capt. Bolton was roundly denouncing the lawyer for his pusillanimous conduct.

Dutton was endeavoring to defend himself, but not very successfully.

"That's queer," was the thought of the two boys, referring to the distinctness with which every word was heard.

"I'll never rest easy till that boy is in the penitentiary," Bolton asserted. "And I'll land him there inside of a month, see if I don't! He is safe enough for that, if the cops can only get their grippers on him. Who do you suppose that other cub was?"

"Think you'd know him again?" Dutton asked, in a brighter tone, pleased that the conversation had changed from his recent exhibition of cowardice.

"I don't know. It was so infernally dark in that attic, and, I can tell you! I wasn't given much time to look about me!"

"Those young rascals fought like tigers. Two grown men couldn't have tied me up in handsomer style."

This was said with a mixture of admiration and anger.

A short time after there came a shuffling of feet, and a door was heard to slam; then all grew silent.

The slow minutes went by, and Mat and Phil twisted, their squirming motions sending up clouds of soot.

"We'll have to get out of this!" Mat whispered. "I don't believe I can stand it any longer."

He choked and coughed as he said it.

"All right!"

But Phil Darrow found that all was not right, when he essayed to climb to the top of the chimney. He had always considered himself a good climber, but he could not make his way up on the inside of that contracted flue.

After wriggling and twisting unsuccessfully for a few minutes, he was compelled to call down:

"I just can't make it, Mat! We are stuck!"

Both were now coughing violently, their nostrils and lungs being filled with soot, which Phil's efforts constantly dislodged.

"Try again!" Mat urged.

"It's just no use! I can't get up an inch!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE.

As it proved impossible for the boys to climb up the flue, they began to consider whether it would be safe to try to descend. They had found that slipping down was easy enough. Where they might land was the thing that troubled them.

"We'll be in a pretty pickle if we drop into some man's parlor," was Mat's whispered exclamation.

"We can't stay here, though!" said Phil.

"That's so—we can't."

Forthwith, Mat began to "crawl" down the dark hole, feeling every inch of the way before him with his feet. He went slowly and carefully, and Phil, following in the same way, showered him with soot and ashes.

When a faint light showed below, Mat trembled with fresh excitement. There was a lamp in the room toward which he was moving, and in all probability the room was occupied.

However, there was no help for it, and when it was safe to drop, he let go all hold, and fell through the remaining distance.

Scrambling quickly out of the way, so as not to impede Phil's descent, Mat Ducro cleared his eyes of the soot that filled them, and saw that he had tumbled into a big wood fireplace, whose wide mouth opened into a well-lighted room.

Then Phil Darrow dropped at his side.

Mat discovered that the room was unoccupied, and took courage.

As soon as the gypsy boy had gouged the dirt out of his eyes, and had been given time for a hasty glance about him, bowed himself in noiseless laughter.

"Well, if you ain't a sight, Mat Ducro! You look worse than a tramp, and are as black as any nigger!"

Then he clasped a black hand over his own very black mouth, and went into convulsions.

"What are you laughing at?" Mat growled. "You are as black as I am. You'd better find out first if there's anything to laugh about. Do you know where we are?"

"No; where?"

"If I'm not much mistaken, we're in Dutton's office. I reckon we've tumbled out of the frying-pan into the fire!"

"Cricky! That's why we could hear them talking so plain!"

Then Phil Darrow puckered his lips into a low whistle, and stared about the apartment.

It was plainly a lawyer's office, for there were some law books on a shelf, and on a table in one corner was a mass of papers and writing material.

The fireplace was filled with the fallen soot and ashes, and large quantities of it had puffed out on the floor, and more shook from the clothing of the boys whenever they moved.

"This office will be in a pretty mess!" and Mat Ducro endeavored to brush some of the black, sticky stuff from his clothing into the fireplace.

"Well, if this is Dutton's office, I just don't care," Phil avowed.

He stepped toward the door and turned at the knob.

The door refused to open, and when he examined it, he found it locked and bolted.

The look of dismay which came into his face was concealed by the soot.

"Stuck again!" he ejaculated. "Might about as well be up the chimney!"

they could breathe freely here, and that was a consideration.

When the lawyer returned they could not guess, and they began to grow nervous.

Phil looked at the gas jet burning in the corner, and then, seeing a mirror, stepped in front of it.

He drew back in astonishment. From head to foot he was a mass of soot, and his face was streaked and grimed in a manner most wonderful to behold.

"There is one comfort," was his reflection. "I don't think Bolton or Dutton, either one, would recognize us, if they walked into the office this minute!"

Then a happy thought struck him, and he began to dampen the soot, and deliberately smear it over his face, thus changing his complexion to the hue of ebony.

"Better black yourself up a little more, Mat," was his suggestion. "Then, if we do get out of here—which we'll do if we have to smash down the door—we'll be taken for negro coal-heavers, or something of that sort, and won't have so much trouble in getting out of the city."

Mat Ducro caught at the suggestion, and began to smear his own face in the same manner.

The alteration was so complete that neither would have been recognized by his most intimate acquaintance.

"We will do!" and Phil grinningly spread his mouth in imitation of a negro in a minstrel show. "Walk into that tunnel, will you?"

"This is no time for joking," again reminded Mat.

And, indeed, it was not, for steps were heard ascending the stairway.

That Dutton or Bolton was returning to the office seemed reasonably certain.

The boys looked at each other questioningly, fearing that they were in a trap.

"He don't know we're in here," said Mat, "and maybe we can dash by him when he opens the door."

But Phil Darrow had already thought of a better plan.

"You slip over to that light, and be quiet about it, and just as he throws open the door, you turn it out; then I'll ram my head into his stomach and knock him down, and we'll slide for the street!"

This was hurriedly and excitedly whispered, for there was not a moment to lose. The one coming was already near the top of the stairway, and in less than half a minute would be at the door.

Mat Ducro tiptoed quickly to the gas jet and took hold of the screw, ready to turn the gas out, while Phil Darrow stooped just beside the door, ready to bowl over the fat lawyer as soon as the latter made his appearance.

He believed it was the lawyer, for the tread was heavy and ponderous. However, he was resolved to serve Bolton in the same way, should it prove to be that individual.

Each of the boys was trembling with excitement.

As the man drew nearer, the heavy fall of the footsteps left no doubt that he was Dutton.

Phil was glad of this, for he much preferred an encounter with the fat lawyer to one with the captain.

The lawyer had not shown that he was a brave man, and Phil could not repress a chuckle as he fancied Dutton's astonishment and discomfiture.

Dutton advanced with calm deliberation to the door, jingled some keys, and began to unlock it. He was muttering to himself, and seemed not in a very good humor. Possibly, he had quarreled with Bolton.

Mat's hand shook so that he could hardly grasp the screw of the gas fixture, and Phil crouched still lower in nervous suspense.

Then the door was shoved slowly open, and the burly form of the lawyer came into view.

The light went out on the instant, plunging the room into Egyptian darkness, and Phil Darrow propelled his head with stunning force against Dutton's rotund abdomen.

There followed a howl of pain and dismay, as Dutton went down with a crash that shook the building.

No more frightened and bewildered lawyer was there ever in the Crescent City.

"Oh! oh!" he moaned, and then he began to lift his voice in a feeble cry for help, begging in the same breath to be spared.

"Do not strike me again, gentlemen!" he implored. "Oh, do not! Do not! Take my money, but do not kill me!"

Dutton was under the impression that he had been attacked by burglars, who had gained access to his office, and that he was in imminent danger of instant death.

Mat and Phil did not tarry to hear more, but sprang across the prostrate and wriggling body and leaped down the stairway with tremendous bounds.

Almost before they were aware of it, they were in the well-lighted street.

CHAPTER IX.

A DASH FOR LIBERTY.

Phil Darrow, who was in advance, slowed up, in spite of his intense desire to run.

"We must take it slow," he whispered, "or we'll be suspected, and followed!"

The groans and cries of the scared lawyer came to them, with subdued force.

They saw they had not been observed, but they knew that Dutton would soon be heard, or that he would recover from his fright, and hasten down into the street, and they walked on, trying to assume an air of calm deliberateness they were far from feeling.

The old French-like street was narrow and crowded, and there were a number of negroes in it, some of these almost as black and sooty as the boys.

But Mat and Phil were not willing to trust wholly to their disguise, and at the first cross street they changed their course, and as soon as they reached an alley they slipped into it.

So far, there was no sound of pursuit, and they plunged on, walking with quicker gait.

Then there came to them a confused scurry of feet and a commotion which made them think a search was being instituted, and they broke into a demoralized run.

Realizing, however, that this would never do, and that they would surely point themselves out, they again fell into a walk, and as soon as possible turned into another alley, to more effectually baffle their pursuers.

This opened on a street radiant with electric lights, and here they stopped for a moment, to consult as to the best course to follow.

They did not notice that they were standing near a small building, until a dog rushed savagely through a doorway.

The dog barked loudly, and made a dash at Mat's legs, and he gave it a kick which sent it howling back into the little house.

Thereupon, a man appeared—a withered old man—who screamed at them in a high, cracked voice:

"You've been wanting to rob me, have you? Take them, Major! Take 'em!"

Then he began to call for the police, and to bewail his lonely and defenseless condition.

The dog again dashed out, with much fierce baying, and the boys saw they could not remain there longer with safety.

"Confound the luck!" Phil growled. "We seem to be hunted on all sides!"

He struck out at the dog, and then, seeing that the old man's outcries were causing people to hasten in that direction, they ran on down the alley, preferring the lighted street to the perils about them.

Flying down the alley like the wind, and when near its end, Phil Darrow tripped and fell over an old woman, who was crouching there with a basket of apples.

"Beg pardon, aunty!" he gasped, scrambling to his feet, and picking up the apples that had been knocked from the basket.

Fortunately, he did not try to disguise his voice.

Immediately the old woman struggled up and grasped him by the arm.

"Is it you, Phil?" she whispered, staring into his blackened face. "Is it you, Phil Darrow? We've been huntin' all over the city for you."

Phil gave a little cry of astonishment.

"Why, Mother Magnus!"

"Yes, it's me, Phil. I've been lookin' fer you! And that—"

She turned and looked at Mat Ducro.

"A friend of mine," said Phil, airily. "New acquaintance, mother. But he's all right. He's no blacker than I am when his face is washed—not so black. I want to take him to the camp."

Mother Magnus irresolutely shook her head.

As the reader can see, she was a member of the gypsy band to which Phil Darrow belonged, and she had all the gypsy's secretive caution. She did not fancy this bringing of a strange lad,

who was not of the gypsy blood, into the wagon camp on the edge of the marsh.

Phil felt that there was no time to be lost, but he, nevertheless, explained, as hurriedly as he could, who Mat Ducro was, and how he had chanced to meet him.

"I hope you'll let me go along, Mother Magnus," Mat pleadingly put in. "I have no place else to go."

Only for another moment did she hesitate. Then she took the basket of apples on her arm, and hobbled into the street, closely followed by the boys; but she kept shaking her old head, to show she was not pleased with what Phil had done, and that she did not approve of this habit he had of making new and strange acquaintances.

Near the curbstone stood a dejected-looking mule, attached to a shabby cart.

Mother Magnus was both wary and wise. She had heard enough to know that the boys were in constant danger of arrest; but she knew, too, that hasty actions and hurried flight would bring about that arrest quicker than anything else.

Her keen eyes saw everything on the street, before she ventured into the full glare of the lamps, and she glanced back at the boys, to make sure that their disguise was impenetrable.

When she had done this, she walked straight toward the cart, giving no apparent heed to anything, and then she turned about, and called out, sharply:

"You Jim, you black scamp! jump lively there and untie that mule. You're the laziest, no-account nigger in New Orleans!"

Phil took this order to himself, and slouched to the mule's head, and arranged the bridle and lines.

Mother Magnus had mounted to the seat by this time, and Mat was climbing in behind.

Phil Darrow leaped in at Mat's side, where they squatted on the floor of the cart, and the old woman took up a heavy gad and drove the mule into a trot.

There were other mule carts in the street, and many negroes and shabby women, so that no one gave them a second glance.

But in spite of this, the boys felt nervous and uneasy, for the glow of the lamps made the street almost as light as day.

When Mother Magnus had driven two or three blocks in this manner, she turned the mule cart into a street that ran toward the edge of the marsh.

Not once did she speak, however, or look back to see how the boys were faring.

It required nearly an hour to get out of the city; then the dirty tents of the gypsy camp loomed before them through the gloom.

Mother Magnus dismounted from the high seat with much more agility than she had shown in the city, thus proving that her rheumatic limp was but a pretense.

"Cricky! but I'm glad to get back to the camp again!" Phil avowed, stretching his cramped limbs.

He and Mat slipped the harness from the mule, and turned it loose to graze on the coarse marsh grass.

When they had done this, they followed Mother Magnus, who had gone on toward the tents.

The gypsy boy was about to announce his return by a triumphant shout, when he felt Mother Magnus' hand on his arm.

He turned around, and saw facing him an elderly gypsy woman, well-dressed, but in the gypsy fashion.

"Mother Ferola!" he exclaimed.

Then he whispered to Mat:

"She is the queen of all the gypsy tribes in this vicinity."

"Who are you?" the woman demanded, looking Mat over sharply.

Her eyes held a strange light, as she curiously scanned his features.

"You are not a gypsy?"

"He's a friend of mine, Mother Ferola," said Phil. "And a friend of a gypsy should be treated as a gypsy."

"That's so! Go and wash, both of you, and then I'll talk to you."

Then she called to Mother Magnus to bring them some clothing from a certain box in one of the wagons.

The boys had almost forgotten their disreputable appearance, for the moment, but it was a relief to know that water was at hand, and a change of clothing was promised.

Mother Ferola gave them a cake of soap, and Phil led the way to a well-filled bucket. It was probably a horse bucket, but Mat was not inclined to be squeamish.

Mother Magnus brought them a big bundle of clothing from which to select, and when they had washed the soot from their faces, necks and hands, as well as they could, they retired into the darkness beyond the light of the fires, and made a complete change in their attire.

The coat which Mat picked out was rather big for him, but it was better than none, he thought, and he was contented. There was a wonderful alteration in their looks when they again presented themselves before Mother Ferola.

She admitted them into the tent, and again looked at Mat curiously.

Her eyes lingered long on his face, and she was seen to mutter some unintelligible words.

"Now, you may go away, Phil; and I want this boy to tell me his story."

Phil retired, and joined one of the talking groups about the fire.

The gypsy woman pushed forward a bucket for Mat to sit on, and took a seat herself on a bundle of clothing.

The tent was in disordered confusion, but there were a number of things in it which Mat had not expected to find in a gypsy tent. One of them was a handsome mirror, and the other was a comfortable lounge. Mother Ferola seemed to disdain the lounge, however.

"Let me tell you your fortune," looking him squarely in the eyes. "I'm a fortune-teller, you know—all of us gypsies are fortune-tellers—and there's something about you that interests me."

Mat was startled by this unexpected request, but was, nevertheless, willing to have his fortune told, so long as it cost him nothing. Still, he did not believe the gypsy woman could tell a sure enough fortune.

She took his left hand, and began to study the palm, and her first declaration startled him still more:

"You are nearly sixteen years old, and you were born in Plaquemine Parish."

"How did you know that?" Mat asked, pulling away his hand.

"Why, it's in the hand! How are you to know if I tell a true fortune if I don't show you the past as well as the future? We always show the past, as a proof of our power. It would be easy to guess at the future, but not so easy to guess at the past, and so people know when they are getting their money's worth."

She again took hold of his hand, began to trace lines on it with her forefinger, and a feeling of awe crept over the boy.

"What strange witchery does this woman possess?" he asked himself.

Was it true, as he had always heard, that gypsies were gifted with prophetic insight.

Her voice broke the silence:

"Phil said your name was Matio Ducro, or I might have told that."

"Could you have told that?" his amazement growing.

"Perhaps. Sometimes we can tell names, and sometimes we can't. It all depends on circumstances, and on the clearness of the lines in the hands."

"You see that long line there? That is the lifeline. It is long, you see, and shows that you'll live to a good age; but you see, too, that it's broken at the ends. That means that in your old age you'll have sickness or trouble."

She said this with an air of great gravity, and Mat Ducro was much impressed.

She professed to foretell a great many other things that would be of no interest to the reader, then said, abruptly:

"But I'm a poor fortune-teller by the side of the old witch-doctor. We're going his way soon, and you must see him. Ask him to tell you the fortune of Matio Ducro. Remember to say it that way!"

She became lost for a moment in thought.

"We'll not go away until to-morrow evening. You are not much liked here. The people don't want you to stay. But they'll let you go along, if you will show them that you can bring them in some money. I think I can fix that."

She went to the door and called Phil, and when he came in, she said:

"As soon as you have had a little to eat and a nap, I want you to go straight back to the city. Phil can take his fiddle, and I'll give this boy a tambourine. Play on the streets to-morrow, and be sure to bring back some money. Otherwise, the men won't let him go along with us."

Mat's face paled, and he stared at her.

"Oh, I'll fix you up so that you won't be in a bit of danger."

Mother Ferola was quick to think and act.

She went to a little box and got out some pigments. These she skillfully applied to the faces and hands of the two boys, completely changing their appearance.

"Your own mother wouldn't know you!" she declared, stepping back and surveying her work. "Now, I'll crop your hair."

When their hair had been closely "shingled," and Mat's duly stained, they resembled mulatto boys, dressed in ill-fitting and shabby garments.

"Now, Mother Magnus will give you some supper, then you must get a few winks of sleep, and be in the city by daylight, to begin your work."

CHAPTER X.

A NIGHT JOURNEY.

The sweet strains of a violin rose in the Frenchy street, before the door of the stairway in Dutton's office.

The violin was played by Phil Darrow, and Mat Ducro stood at his side, tambourine in hand.

The sun was rapidly lowering, and they had played in various quarters of the city, through all the long hours of the day. They had been successful, too, and their pockets were bulging with small coin.

No one had molested them—no one had given them a suspicious glance, and now, grown bold and confident, they had ventured into this street, drawn solely by curiosity.

They had not been playing very long, until Dutton appeared on the street, as if he meant to go uptown.

He looked curiously at the lads, and when Mat ran toward him, shaking the extended tambourine, Dutton stopped and dropped a dime into it.

"Thank you," said Mat, touching his ragged hat and pocketing the coin.

"The deuce!"

Dutton was seen to tremble and change countenance.

Then he hastened away on his shaky legs, and the disguised boys, certain they had been recognized, that Dutton meant to summon an officer, hurried rapidly from the vicinity.

They feared to tarry longer in the city after that, and as soon as they could they made tracks for the gypsy camp.

It was after night when they reached it, but a bright moon and the camp-fires made the surroundings almost as light as day.

While they were yet some distance off, confused sounds and outcries came to them, and when they ran quickly forward, they saw that a slender girl was in danger of her life from the antics of a vicious pony.

The gypsies, in their trading, had got hold of a wild and unbroken broncho from the Texas ranges. The treacherous little beast seemed gentle enough until this girl mounted it. Then it had commenced to plunge and buck in the maddest manner.

Two or three gypsy men were trying to get a rope over the broncho's head, but it broke past them and dashed out of the camp.

The girl was terror-stricken, and could do nothing to check it. Indeed, she had ceased to try, and was only endeavoring to cling to the back of the little brute, so that she might not be hurled to the earth.

After trying to crush her by dashing at the trees, the broncho began to rear again.

Squealing viciously, it pitched forward and backward, waltzed sidewise, leaped high into the air, and came down with tremendous jolts, and all the while the girl clung to it, though her face was of a yellow, waxy hue, and her eyes seemed starting from their sockets.

The boys were not noting this spectacle unmoved. Both ran toward her, but Mat Ducro reached the broncho first.

It seemed reckless bravery on his part, for the broncho lunged at him with his forefeet, but he avoided the stroke, and grasping the bridle bit, hung on desperately.

Then the broncho, rearing and squealing again, struck at him time after time, and whipped him up and down, until it seemed that every bone in his body would be crushed.

But Mat clung with a tenacity that knew no relenting. He realized that his own life was now in the balance, as well as the life of the girl. If he relaxed his hold and fell to the ground, the broncho's sharp hoofs would crush him to pulp.

Meanwhile, Phil Darrow was dancing about, trying vainly to

render Mat some assistance, but prevented by the broncho's lunges, and the gypsy men were hurrying up, with excited cries.

Time after time the broncho tried to break away from Mat; then, finding its efforts useless, it gave a wild and angry scream, and fell, kicking, over on its side.

It had tried to hurl itself on its back, after the fashion of these vicious beasts, but Mat's weight on the bridle bit had kept it from accomplishing its purpose.

The girl slipped to the ground in a limp heap, and the broncho began to flail again with its feet.

But the gypsy men were now at hand, and they threw themselves on it with splendid courage.

A coat was wound about its head, and a choking noose quickly encircled its neck.

When it scrambled up again, ready for another outburst, the rope, which had been secured to a tree, threw it sprawling, and choked the breath out of it.

Mat was in a worse condition than the girl he had saved. He was half unconscious, his clothing was torn to shreds, and bruises covered his body.

Phil Darrow lifted him, and then the gypsies gathered around and bore him into one of the tents.

Mother Ferola bustled forward, a scared look in her face, and some bottles in her hands.

Water was dashed over Mat, liniments applied, and a hasty examination made of his injuries.

No bones were broken, but there were two or three cuts, which Mother Ferola bound up with tenderest care.

Under this treatment, Mat quickly regained full consciousness, and stared about him. Pleased faces looked into his own. Phil was wringing his limp hand, and Mother Ferola was muttering strangely.

"The girl? Is she——"

Mother Ferola smiled.

"She is in the next tent, and is not hurt. She only fainted, and will be all right in a few minutes."

This was such good news that Mat struggled up on the cot, and announced that he was sound as a top, except for the bruises. Then he put his feet on the ground and stood up, to prove his assertion.

"You'll be sore enough by morning. But I'm glad you're no worse hurt, as we want to change our camping ground to-night."

This was said by Mother Ferola, who then cleared the tent of its other occupants, and began to talk to Mat again about the witch-doctor, and the wonderful fortunes the witch-doctor could tell.

An hour later, the tents were pulled down, the horses harnessed to the wagons, and the gypsies resumed their wanderings.

They seemed anxious to get away from the vicinity of New Orleans, and as this was also Mat's wish, he was willing enough to accompany them.

He had, likewise, noticed that the looks given him by the men were kindlier and less ominous, and he knew that his bravery in saving the life of the gypsy girl had begun to bear pleasant fruit.

The money, scattered in the grass by the failings of the pony, had been carefully hunted out by the gypsies, and the amount brought in by Mat and Phil was calculated, too, to put them in a good humor.

Mat had learned that the girl's name was Meg Marvel, and he was not a little gratified when he found himself in the same wagon with her.

The wagon had a dirty canvas cover, and was filled with miscellaneous odds and ends. It belonged to Mother Ferola, but only the girl occupied it when Mat was told to enter it, and she welcomed him pleasantly, and made room for him at her side.

Almost as soon as he was within, and the rattle of the moving wagons began to resound, she began to chatter about the "awful" pony, to extol Mat's bravery, and to reiterate her thanks.

"I heard what Mother Ferola said to you," she asserted, leaning toward him in the darkness and whispering the words. "She wants you to call on the old witch-doctor. I say don't!"

There was a little thrill of horror in the tones.

"Why?" Mat questioned.

"Because he is a so-called voodoo and snake-charmer. There are snakes in his house and all about his grounds. He casts spells that make people die. He is a negro, you know, and all the negroes are afraid of him. Besides, there is no such thing as true fortune-telling. I am a gypsy, and know that that is so, though I wouldn't want any gypsy to hear me say it."

"Do you know why Mother Ferola wants me to go there?" Mat asked.

"No; I wish I did. She's got some cause, though!"

"How did you know she told me to go?"

The girl laughed.

"You won't tell? I poked my head under the tent and listened; that's how I know! Oh, we gypsies ain't angels! If we was, we wouldn't go around cheating people, telling fortunes and trading horses!"

Mat laughed.

"And there's another thing I heard, but not in Mother Ferola's tent." She sank her voice still lower. "You want to be on your guard every minute. Some of the men were talking about you, and they said that five hundred dollars' reward was offered for your capture. They like money, you know!"

A chill of fear swept over the boy.

"Maybe they won't do anything now, for they're awfully pleased at what you done. But you want to keep your eyes open!"

Mother Ferola slipped back from the seat at this juncture, and the girl drew away, and, though Mat was anxious to question her further on the subject, the opportunity did not come.

CHAPTER XI.

MAT AS A FORTUNE-TELLER.

The low, green marsh lay behind the gypsies, and a grim and mossy forest in front.

The tents had been pitched again, the sun was shining, the children romping, and the ponies grazing. The Crescent City was far behind.

Mat Ducro stood in a small, green-curtained tent, that, for a gypsy tent, was handsomely furnished.

The big mirror was in there, and the upholstered lounge. Besides, there were several nice chairs, a few brackets and a little table covered with crimson velvet.

Out in front of the tent there hung a faded crimson curtain, which bore strong resemblance to the gaudy curtains to be seen in front of the sideshows and circus annexes, for it was covered with strange devices, and figures of birds, beasts and serpents, all intertwined with letters and queer hieroglyphics.

This tent was the fortune-telling tent of Mother Ferola, where she gave audience to the curiously inquisitive and superstitious people who came to her to inquire concerning their future.

Its appearance was well calculated to strike them with ignorant awe, and to fill them with a belief that she was a creature marvelous for her prophetic gifts.

Mat had been sent in there to put the tent to rights.

Having completed the task, he was about to depart, when the flap of the tent opened and a negro hurried in, dropping down almost out of breath on the lounge.

Mat stared, for the negro was none other than Tom, the cook of the *Southern Cross*.

Mat quickly saw that the black was giving him scant heed, and seemed to be in great agony of body or mind, and even when the black looked up, and fixed on him a pair of glassy eyes, Mat saw that he was still unrecognized.

Nevertheless, the boy trembled not a little, for the negro's entrance had been of so startling a character.

"Oh, sabe me, marse! Sabe me!" the darky wailed, getting down on his knees and crawling toward Mat, making a piteous spectacle of himself.

The mulatto complexion, the changed clothing and the cropped and darkened hair were standing the boy in good stead.

"I'se been hoodooed! I'se gwine die, sho! I feels de com-bobberation ob pe p'ison in my bones! It's a-wukkin' an' a-wuk-kin' up to my heaft!"

He put a shaking black hand on his left breast, to indicate the position the poison had reached.

"It's de wuk' ob de witch-doctoh! He cas' his eye on me, and he look dis heah way an' dis heah way; an' den de p'ison 'gin to crope up my laigs an' into my body, an' de pains 'gin to shoot through me, an' de ager 'gin to freeze my blood. I'se gwine die, sho!"

Though Mat was much astonished by all this, and wondered how Tom chanced to be there, he endeavored to conceal his surprise.

He was not very successful, though, but the darky was in no condition to observe anything.

"What is it you want?" Mat queried.

"Oh, Marse Forchin-teller, I want you to tek away de spell. I want you to dror de p'ison out'n me. I'se been hoodooed by the witch-doctoh!"

"So you've been fooling around the witch-doctor, have you?" giving a disguising twist to his voice. "Sit down there at the table. If you stand shivering and shaking that way, I can't do anything for you."

"Yes, marse!"

The frightened darky, accepting this as strict truth, dropped shivering into a chair by the table, and looked appealingly at Mat.

So abject was the fear which he manifested, and so ludicrous were the contortions of his features, that the boy could have laughed outright. However, as a pretended fortune-teller, he was forced to assume a grave and mysterious demcanor.

Mat was determined to find out something about the witch-doctor, and also the causes that had drawn down on himself the enmity of the captain of the *Southern Cross*.

To do this, he realized that he must be wary and cautious.

Dropping into a chair at the opposite side of the table, he stretched his stained hands out on the crimson cloth, and looked sternly at the writhing negro.

"I tell you, marse, I'se sho' gwine die, ef you don' help me mighty quick!"

"It's all because you've been doing what you oughtn't to do!" looking severely at him. "You have been paid back for the way you and Lee Bolton treated that boy!"

The negro uttered a spasmodic gurgle and a groan.

"I'm a fortune-teller, you know, and I can see just what you've been doing! Now, what made you do that?"

"Twan't me, Marse Forchin-teller! Marse Bolton say dat boy mus' be 'rested, 'cause he's been a-stealin' sumpin'; an' he tell me I jes got to help him!"

"But why did Capt. Bolton want it done? The boy hadn't really stolen anything."

Mat knew he was treading on slippery ground, and would have been at a loss what to answer, if the cook had said that, being a fortune teller, he ought to be able to answer the question himself.

But the cook failed to notice the contradictory character of Mat's questions and declarations.

The negro denied all knowledge of the motives governing Capt. Bolton, and Mat saw he was speaking the truth. He had been but a tool in Bolton's hands.

"You say the witch-doctor hoodooed you! What were you doing at the witch-doctor's? You know he keeps snakes there, don't you? What made you go there?"

"Marse Bolton sent me to de witch-doctoh wid a letteh. An' de witch-doctoh, he got mad 'cause I stepped on one ob de snaiks."

"And what was in that letter?"

"Sho' marse, I don't know! It was jes' a common letteh."

Mat was again baffled. The negro was not acquainted with the contents of the letter; and, though Mat questioned him in various ways, there was no further information to be got out of him.

He had been sent by Bolton with the letter to the witch-doctor. That letter might have concerned Mat, or it might not. Thinking himself bewitched, he had rushed to the camp of the gypsies to have the evil spell removed.

Knowing that it was fear and fear alone that caused all the darky's distress, Mat stretched out his hand over the woolly head, made some magic passes, and said, in a loud voice:

"Fee, fie, fum! Spirit of evil, avault. Don't bother this good man any longer. Meeny, meeny, mo! Scatter! Whack! Bang! Gone!"

Mat combed his fingers through the woolly locks, and cast the imaginary demon from him, with a fierce gesture.

All the while the negro moaned most dismally, and contorted himself under fancied pangs.

"How do you feel now?" Mat asked, as the black did not at once get on his feet.

"Betteh, marse! Much betteh! But de p'ison is still a discom-bobberatin' a little, an' I kin still feel de ager in my bones!"

"I'll fix you something to wear, and you'll find that that'll all go away directly."

"Yes, marse!"

Mat put some chicken feathers, sand, pebbles and a bit of bone,

into a rag, tied them up, breathed hard on the rag, and handed it to the black.

"Wear that for three days and nights about your neck; and, on the third morning, walk backward a dozen steps and throw it as far as you can over your head; and you'll find that the pains will all be gone."

"Yes, marse."

"I'll not charge you anything; but you better be going, now; and don't hang around the camp, and don't come near it again; for the gypsies don't like to have colored people bothering about here!"

The black was profuse in his thanks; and, when Mat lifted the flap, he hastened quickly away.

Mat saw the darky make his way among the tents and plunge into the marsh, watched curiously by some gypsy women; and was thinking over what he had discovered, when the excited voice of Mother Ferola sounded in his ear:

"Come this way! A number of the gypsy men have agreed to surrender you to the police, that they may get the reward."

She lifted a section of the tent wall; and Mat, looking toward the point indicated, beheld a body of gypsies coming determinedly in that direction.

What was he to do? He could neither fight nor fly!

CHAPTER XII.

THE PERILS OF THE FOREST.

As all thought of escape was useless, and there was no place in the tent where Mat Ducro might be safely hidden, the gypsy woman pushed him behind her, and boldly went to the flap which opened toward the camp.

She cast this aside, and stood facing the men who were resolved on Mat's arrest.

They had been inclined to think well of Mat, because he had saved the life of Meg Marvel; but the offer of the five hundred dollars reward had proved too great a temptation.

They had reasoned that five hundred dollars was not to be picked up every day, and so great a sum could never be more easily earned.

Mother Ferola confronted them with flashing eyes.

"What is it you would have?" she demanded.

"The boy!" replied the leader, cowering a little under her glance.

"You cannot take him! He is under my tent! He has saved the life of a gypsy, at the risk of his own; and he shall be treated as a gypsy so long as he is in the camp!"

"But the money!" the leader pleaded; while the others stood irresolutely.

Then there came a hot dispute, which made Mat tremble.

Mother Ferola entreated and argued; but, not until she declared she would knife the first one that tried to pass her, did they go away. And then they went sullenly and with many mutterings.

Scarcely were they gone when Phil Darrow, who had been drawn by the loud discussion, came into the tent.

Phil looked very much frightened at what had happened, and this did not at all reassure Mat.

Before they could discuss the situation, Mother Ferola also entered.

Though she was cautious in expressing her fears, the boys saw she was much disturbed.

"I think I'd better go away for a little while!" Mat ventured. "You said I ought to visit the witch-doctor; and I'm wanting to, now, more than ever, since I talked with Bolton's cook!"

Mother Ferola had not known who the negro visitor was; and, her curiosity being aroused by this statement, she proceeded to question Mat closely as to what was said and done by the negro while in the tent.

The account left a puzzled look on her face.

"Yes, I think you'd better leave here for a while," was her thoughtful affirmation. "Perhaps, too, you'd better visit the witch-doctor. But look out for these men; and look out for the police!"

Phil immediately declared that if Mat went away he intended to bear him company; and to this the gypsy woman offered but slight objection.

Her thoughtful mood continued. Of what was she thinking? Of the strange fate that seemed driving Mat Ducro toward his

destiny, in spite of the machinations of Lee Bolton? She fancied that the witch-doctor's was the last place Bolton would want the boy to visit, and yet Bolton's offer of reward was hastening Mat in that direction!

"You will find the witch-doctor somewhere over in that woods," she said, nodding toward the black forest. "I haven't been there in a long time; but you'll likely see somebody that can show you the way."

With this she left the tent, intending to talk again of the covetous gypsies; and Mat and Phil began their hasty preparations for departure.

Mother Ferola did not return; and they slipped from the back of the tent, took advantage of some live oaks and of the screen afforded by a band of ponies, and got out of the camp, as they believed, without being seen.

About an hour later they stood in the edge of the big woods that looked so gruesome and uninviting.

They had encountered a darky, who had shown them where they might find a dim trail leading toward the witch-doctor's. But he had utterly refused to accompany them as a guide, though Phil offered him money.

As they plunged into the forest, a heavy gloom seemed to settle about them, produced by the thickness of the foliage above their heads, which shut out the rays of the sun.

The place was almost an impassable jungle. A pungent odor of decaying vegetable matter came from the ground; and, at every step their feet sank through the tangled grass into a black soil, from which oozed fetid water.

Deadly moccasin snakes glided from between the exposed roots of trees, in many instances so nearly resembling the tree roots that the boys came near stepping on them.

And this was the so-styled Phantom Forest, of which they had heard, and within whose depths was to be found the singular being known as the witch-doctor.

No wonder the superstitious negroes shunned the place, and the boys could not repress a thrill of dread as they moved forward.

But they, nevertheless, pushed on, for Mat was resolved to hear what the so-called witch-doctor might be able to tell him, and Phil was equally determined to bear Mat company.

The swampy nature of the ground increased, and in a short time they found themselves standing on the edge of a wide and lazy lagoon. Its waters were almost as black as ink, as they came from the heart of the swamp.

A crazy boat lay on the shore of the lagoon, partially sunk in the slimy mud; and they saw that this afforded the only means of crossing.

At the opposite side, the dim path stretched on into the forest; and there was no way by which the lagoon might be gone around.

They pushed the boat into the water, climbed in, and Mat took up the single oar.

But he had scarcely shoved off, when what he had taken for a black log, rolled lazily over, a pair of wicked eyes looked at him, and the wide mouth of an alligator opened.

Other black logs put themselves in motion, and soon the lagoon was swarming with the vicious saurians.

Mat splashed the paddle in the water to keep them away, which worked well enough for a second or two, but they quickly became bolder, and two or three of them made a dash for the boat.

As the boys were now out on the water, the peril of returning was as great as that of going ahead.

"I don't like this a bit," said Phil.

The snout of an alligator had grazed his coat, and now he stood up, and, fishing a soaked club out of the water, prepared to defend himself.

The lagoon was exceedingly shallow, and a number of gnarled and scrubby trees grew in it.

Mat sat in the bow, and drove the boat on with vigorous strokes, pausing now and then to rap an alligator over the head with the blade. But he whacked once too often, and the blade broke in his hands!

He gasped in dismay. He could not well propel the heavy boat with his hands, or with a club. The distance to the opposite shore was still great, and the alligators were constantly growing bolder.

While he was debating what to do, a big saurian arose directly beneath the boat, lifting it bodily out of the water, and hurling it with great force against one of the scrubby trees.

There sounded the crash of breaking timbers, and Phil and Mat were pitched into the lagoon.

Mat grasped a limb of the tree, and drew himself up out of the water, climbing quickly beyond reach of the alligator's snapping jaws; but Phil Darrow was not so fortunate. He was unable to reach a friendly branch, and Mat was horrified to see a big alligator open its mouth and rush at him.

Phil saw the fierce beast rushing on him also, and splashed the water frantically in his efforts to reach the tree.

He would not have succeeded, however, if Mat had not pulled a club from the tree, and leaped bravely to his assistance.

At this the alligator dived and disappeared, but there were others swimming toward them, reckoning on a feast.

Mat grasped Phil by the collar—for Mat was much the best swimmer—and together they got back to the tree, and climbed, shaking, into the branches.

The broken boat had drifted beyond reach; but it would have been useless, anyway, in its crippled condition.

Their position was deplorable. They were dripping wet, and chilled with cold and fear. Shining eyes and wicked teeth gleamed all about them. Fifty yards or more separated them from the nearest shore, and there was no means of reaching it.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE HOME OF THE WITCH-DOCTOR.

In their despair, the boys lifted their voices in loud shouts for help. Again and again they called, making the arches of the strange forest ring.

Then there came an answering cry from the shore, and they saw a brown-skinned girl hurry out of the forest, from the direction of the witch-doctor's supposed resort.

She took in the situation at a glance, saw the great danger they were in, shouted something, and then disappeared.

"Do you think she has left for good?" Phil asked, drawing up his legs, and climbing still higher up the branch.

"Probably she has gone for help," answered Mat, encouragingly.

That this was correct, they soon discovered.

The girl reappeared on the shore some distance below, poled a wide, barge-like boat out into the water, leaped into it, and pushed it in their direction.

The hapless boys could have cried for very joy. They had never been in so ticklish a position in their lives, and their dread of the alligators was intense.

They saw that the barge was much better adapted to navigating such an infested place than an ordinary boat; and, though the alligators bumped against it threateningly, she poled straight on. Now and then she stopped to jab at one that ventured too near.

She showed no fear, however, and the boys took courage from her heroic attitude.

They had not the least idea who she was; but she was proving their good angel, even though her skin was brown as a berry and her features decidedly negroid.

"Hol' on!" she bawled. "Don' let dem 'gators git a hold ob ye! Two boys like you wouldn't mo'n make a good meal foh one ob um!"

And the boys held on like grim death, drawing their feet up out of reach of the snapping jaws.

As she came nearer, jabbing wickedly now and then with the pole, the alligators sank one by one out of sight, making way for her; though they arose again, some distance beyond, and continued to hover about in a threatening circle.

When the barge had been driven beneath the tree, the boys dropped from their uncomfortable positions, thankful to be saved from the fate that had seemingly awaited them.

They began to shower her with expressions of gratitude.

"Betteh wait tell you is done safe!" she grinned, showing a double row of ivories. "Dem 'gators is monst'ous pesky sometimes! I had one clam' right onto dis heah boat onct. I 'clar' to goodness, I thought he was gwine git me, sho'!"

Then she looked at the boys she had rescued with an air of questioning.

"Wha' you two totin' you'selves to?"
"We're hunting the home of the witch-doctor," said Mat. "Do you know where he lives?"

She laughed again.

"Chile, I think I ought to! I'm his gal. M'lissy Lucindy Jerushy Jane is my name; but dey calls me M'liss, feh shawt!

My paw's name is Misteh Johnnsing Jones; but everybody calls 'im de witch-doctah."

She was garrulously inclined, and continued to rattle on, even after she had commenced to pole the boat from the tree, and while striking at the crowding alligators. Phil said afterward that her tongue made him think of a flutter mill.

Just then both Phil and Mat were thinking too much of their recent peril and escape to give close attention to the girl's talk.

Under her exertions the barge was soon driven ashore, where they all leaped out.

And when the girl had secured it by a rope to a tree, she turned into the ill-defined path and led the way toward her home.

The woods perceptibly opened, and soon they came to higher ground, where were some patches of corn and tobacco. There was also a house here, and an inclosed garden.

The boys looked at the house wonderingly, knowing it held the witch-doctor they had come so far to see. And they questioned concerning what strange things he might be able to tell Mat, and of the outcome of the visit.

Each was reasonably certain that Mother Ferola had not directed Mat to visit the witch-doctor without good cause. Mother Ferola had shown that she knew, in a perfectly natural way, something of Mat's past, and doubtless the witch-doctor knew a great deal more.

With these feelings, the boys approached the house, following the girl around the little garden until they came to a paling gate.

She lifted the latch of the gate, and they stood before the door of the house.

It was set high from the ground on slender posts, and a big dog snarled at them out of the darkness beneath the floor; but, though they looked inquiringly about, they beheld none of the snakes which Meg Marvel had said filled the grounds.

"Paw! paw!" the girl called, after commanding the dog to stop his "yowlin'."

In response, a movement was heard within the house, and soon an old man appeared—an old man with a black face and silvery white hair, who peered at them curiously through a pair of green goggles.

"Dese young gemmen has kyarried demse'ves heah to gits dey fawchins tol', I'spect!"

This was the manner in which the girl introduced them; and then the old man threw the door open and told them to walk in.

The room into which they were admitted was singularly furnished. Bright ribbons of cloth and paper descended from the ceilingless rafters. A green, corded curtain hung at the one little window, completely shutting out the light. Strips of tobacco hung against the walls, and on the floor were a number of pots filled with dried roots and herbs.

A huge basin was visible in a dim corner, a little table and some chairs were in the center of the room, and a big fireplace yawned at the farther end.

Besides this, there were shelves in various unexpected places, some covered with snake skins; and shell ornaments and rattles, tiny drums and medicine bags, and queer glass jars abounded.

The legs of the little table were coiled serpents, standing on their tails; and, at its side, a stuffed alligator, three or four feet high, held up a big card receiver, on which was perched an owl.

The owl was alive and blinked at the boys, as they fancied, in a most uncanny way.

As Phil glanced about him, he felt as if chunks of ice were slipping down his back, and so expressed himself, in a whisper, to Mat.

"It's enough to give any 'one the creeps!" Mat averred, shrugging his shoulders and watching the witch-doctor.

The light being not of the best, the witch-doctor stepped into the corner of the room which held the big basin, and ignited an immense lamp. It gave out a pungent, aromatic odor, and the flame, which was of a greenish hue, threw a sickly glare on all the belongings of the room.

When the witch-doctor turned to them again, they saw he had removed his disfiguring goggles. Under the light of the lamp, his face was a greenish bronze, and his eyes glowed with singular intensity.

The owl began to move on its perch, probably troubled by the light, and to utter dismal sounds; and the boys felt creepier than ever.

The voodooist scanned Mat's face with a searching gaze, uttered something under his breath, then said, as he squatted on the floor and motioned for them to do likewise:

"I'se been a-dreamin' ob you, boy! I see you comin', conin'; an' I knows you'll git heah bimeby. An' now you done come!"

"De old witch-doctoh kin see sarcumstances an' 'glomerations what no one else kin see. When he been dreamin' 'bout you he see de whole alphybet o' yo' name spelt out dis way: 'Matio Ducro!'"

"An' he see, too, all de interestin' sagashiations ob yo' sarcumflex. What yo' been an' what yo' gwine teh be! Wha' yo' come f'um an' wha' yo' gwine!"

It was quite evident that Mr. Johnsing Jones, the eminent voodooist, prided himself on his mastery of big words. He made use of them to impress ignorant auditors.

His statements were opening up to Mat a world of speculation. Mat was wise enough to know that the information possessed by the witch-doctor had been obtained in a manner quite different from that professed.

He recalled the letter mentioned by Bolton's cook, and immediately jumped to the conclusion that the contents of that letter had been descriptive of and personal to himself, and probably had warned the witch-doctor to be on the watch for him.

A feeling of fear was mingled with these thoughts. There was no telling how intimate the witch-doctor might be with the rascally captain of the *Southern Cross*, nor what wiles might be resorted to to put him in the captain's power.

The boy almost wished he had never ventured into the so-called Phantom Forest.

He was wondering, too, concerning the reasons which had induced Mother Ferola to direct him thither, when the witch-doctor again broke the silence.

"You's come heah to git yo' fawchin tol'? I tells de futu'ity an' de retrospec' ob peoples in multitugimous ways. Sometimes I uses de kyads, sometimes I uses de lines ob de han', sometimes I conversationizes wid serpents, an' sometimes I spekylates in de dep's ob de watch mi'roh!"

The boys pretended to be duly impressed with his marvelous power, which exhibition gratified him very much.

Getting on his feet, and reaching into a little glass jar, he drew out a writhing blacksnake, which he petted affectionately, and then coiled around his neck.

A shudder passed over Mat, but Phil Darrow had seen too many blacksnakes to be afraid of them.

"If you'll perambulate dis way, young gemmen, we'll try de watch lookin' glass. Dey's sumpin' tells me dat miroh possessifess good fawchin foh de young man wid whom I'se been conversatin'."

Mat and Phil followed him, with keen interest, to the very big basin, which stood just beneath the sputtering lamp.

As they advanced, they saw it was nearly filled with water; that it was, in fact, the "water mirror" of which he had spoken.

That a simple basin of water could hold the words of a fortune in its depth, seemed so preposterous an idea, however, that they really expected to see nothing.

The old darky turned the light down, and then bade them look.

At first they saw nothing; but, as their eyes became accustomed to the half gloom, they saw the outline of an island, of singular configuration; and across one end of it were written these words:

"Here is Treasure Buried for Matio Ducro!"

Each uttered a little cry of bewilderment.

As they drew back, wondering words on their lips, the old man turned the light still lower, swept a hand through the water several times, then requested them to look again.

The bottom of the mirror was gloomier and darker; the little island was gone; but in its place was a grassy mound, which was plainly seen to be a grave. At one end of the mound was a white gravestone; and on the gravestone his inscription:

"Sacred to the Memory of Matio Ducro."

The light went out; and the voice of the old voodooist sounded in their ears:

"Let the trufe be the trufe! What so evah contrarifies de prognications, let de sea 'vour him!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A FIGHT WITH RATTLES.

Mat's thoughts were whirling, although he knew nothing but a clever trick had been played, and he but dimly heard the

words of the so-called witch-doctor, who was moving again toward the center of the room:

"I suppositions dat yo' gemmens rec'nizes dat island as Maladoh Island, does yo'?"

Mat caught at this; though he was thinking of the cook, of Lee Bolton, and of Dutton, the lawyer.

He had come there disguised as a mulatto boy. Had the witch-doctor instantly penetrated that disguise? Could he have penetrated it all, if he had heard nothing?

And from whom could such information come? It was all so utterly bewildering that he could form no conjecture. But he recalled the fact that Dutton had seen through his mask, in the city; and at this circumstance he wildly clutched.

However, the witch-doctor was still talking:

"Co'se you wants mo' fawchins dan dat, an' I'm prepared to expostuate f'um yo' cradle to yo' def. We'll try de kyads, now, an' see if dey's a sho' 'nuff gol' mine in dat island! Curioستest sarcumstance I evah see, dat island is!"

But the promised fortune was never to be foretold.

A howl of excitement and fear came from Phil. A great clattering arose, and he began to leap up and down.

An angry snarl dropped from the lips of the voodooist.

"Look out deh, you young fool! Dem's rattlers, an' you'll be gettin' yo' def!"

Phil was already aware of his peril, and was doing his best to get out of harm's way.

He had knocked over a big jar of live rattlesnakes; and these were now squirming over the room, throwing themselves into pugnacious attitudes, and sounding their fear-inspiring warnings.

The blacksnake was dropped by the witch-doctor as he sprang past one of the whirring rattlers; and Phil, stepping back to avoid another, set his foot, with great violence, on the blacksnake's head.

Its head was flattened by the heavy heel, and it was fatally injured; and the witch-doctor, seeing this as it thrashed crazily over the floor, became wild with rage.

Phil, however, was giving no heed to the witch-doctor.

There was a heavy wooden poker at the side of the fireplace, and, seeing this, he knocked a rattler whirling into the far corner of the room, and began to pound at the head of another of the venomous reptiles.

Mat was equally stirred. There was no other poker to be had, but he picked up a chair, sidled in Phil's direction, and was prepared to smash the first snake that reared itself in his path.

Driven half insane by this attack on his pets, the voodooist hurled himself on Phil, fairly gnashing his teeth.

But Phil shook him off; and he and Mat rushed for the door, though rattlers were all about the room.

They were not to escape so easily, however.

The crazed witch-doctor overtook them, and threw himself on Mat, bearing the latter down just at the threshold.

A big rattler sounded and coiled itself to dash its fangs into Mat's thrashing feet; but Phil Darrow knocked it sprawling with the club, and then hurried to Mat's assistance.

Thus struggling, the trio rolled out of the door, down the rickety steps, and into the yard.

They were safe for the present from the rattlers; but the witch-doctor was proving himself as cruelly vicious as the worst of these.

He sank his long fingers into Mat's hair, and held on with maniacal strength, while his wild eyes rolled, and his breath came in spasmodic gasps.

Then he began to call:

"M'liiss, M'liiss! Come heah, gal, quick!"

Phil Darrow was doing his utmost to pull the frantic old man from Mat's back, while Mat was squirming and wriggling like an eel.

But that grip on Mat's hair could not be shaken.

The big club had followed them down the steps into the yard; and Phil Darrow now grasped it. He was becoming almost as excited and frantic as the witch-doctor himself; and the look in his eyes showed that he meant to brain the old man if the latter did not release his chum.

And all the while the voodooist's cries arose frantically.

Before Phil could lift the murderous club there were sounds of hurrying feet, and M'liiss came into view, accompanied by Lee Bolton.

Phil Darrow retreated a step, and a puzzled look shone in his

face. Bolton had been described to him by Mat, but Phil had never seen him; so that he was in doubt as to whether the newcomer would prove to be a friend or a foe.

But his doubts were swept away. Mat Ducro, crushed beneath the weight of the witch-doctor, could yet see out; and Bolton's name left his lips in a scared gurgle.

Capt. Lee Bolton was swinging a big revolver as he came along; and he hastened his footsteps as soon as he clearly saw the struggling group.

It did not take him long, with the assistance of the witch-doctor, to overpower the two boys and bind their hands.

The rattlers had crawled away, however, and sought concealment behind various articles of furniture, so that none of them were to be seen. A chilling, suggestive sound came, now and then, though, which the rattlers made in moving and scraping their scales against the bare floor.

Phil and Mat were driven into the farther end of the room, near the big fireplace, and then the witch-doctor hastened to bring out some ropes with which to bind them.

He accomplished this with much deftness, while Lee Bolton held the boys submissively quiet with the fear-inspiring revolver.

As soon as this was done, the old voodooist and his daughter began a lively search for the hidden snakes.

The open door lighted the room, and by this light they went about the work systematically.

They did not venture to lift the reptiles in their hands, but whenever a snake was found they pinned its head to the floor with a forked stick, and while in this helpless position, it was plucked from the floor by the tail and dropped into a wide-mouthed jar.

After a hunt of half an hour all the rattlers were recovered, but a few of them had been so much injured by the boys' clubs that the witch-doctor dispatched them.

This, together with the loss of the black snake, which had been his especial pet and favorite, put the voodooist into a particularly bad humor, and there is no doubt he would have been pleased to lay violent hands on the boys, if Bolton had permitted it.

The captain of the *Southern Cross* had his own ideas, however, as to the disposal of the captive.

Both Phil and Mat were in a very uncomfortable frame of mind, as they sat helplessly near the big fireplace and watched the recapture of the snakes.

A deep dread of the future inspired them. Mat was sure he was to be returned to prison.

Even though the fireplace and chimney were astonishingly large, these offered no hope, bound as the boys were.

As soon as the snakes were all safely stowed again in the jar, Lee Bolton walked back to where the boys were crouching.

Singularly enough, he seemed very much at home in the queer room, and going to a corner, he came back with a tin wash basin well filled with water, and a quantity of soft soap in a gourd.

Then he directed M'liss to untie the hands of his prisoners, while he again drew out his revolver and stood guard.

"Now, I want you to wash that stain off your hands and faces, so that I can get a good look at you!" was his command. "Who daubed it on, anyway? It's a neat piece of work!"

Not until he repeated the question did they tell him who had applied the pigment.

"Mother Ferola, eh?" was the thoughtful comment. "Seems to me she might have been in better business. If she don't look out she may get herself arrested."

He was eying Phil Darrow inquisitively.

"And you're a gypsy, too, eh?"

The boy did not answer this, for they were bowing over the wash basin and scrubbing hard at the stains which Mother Ferola had so carefully laid on.

The stains were not easy to wash away, and much scrubbing and many applications of the soft soap were required. But the mulatto complexions faded at last.

When this had been successfully accomplished, the bonds were reapplied by Bolton, and drawn so tightly about the wrists of the boys that they were painful.

Phil vigorously protested against this, but it only made Bolton draw the rope still tighter.

"I can see that you're as big a scamp as Mat Ducro, you young hound, and I'll tie you so tight you can't wiggle!"

A look of hate came into Phil's black eyes, which might have warned Bolton that the gypsy boy was of a revengeful disposition, and he might drive him too far.

The witch-doctor was still fuming over the damage done his valuable property, and was gathering up some herbs which had been knocked down and scattered. They were herbs collected with much labor from the swamp, and which he esteemed highly in his peculiar medical practice.

Johnsing Jones was more than a fortune-teller and snake charmer. He professed great healing powers, and, though he was much feared by the negroes, they came to him from long distances when in need of a doctor.

Lee Bolton left his hapless prisoners, when he had made sure they could not wriggle out of their bonds, and went back to where the witch-doctor was mumbling and grumbling.

Then the captain drew him aside, and together they went into an adjoining room.

The girl had disappeared.

Soon the voices of Bolton and the witch-doctor were indistinctly heard. Bolton was speaking of the prisoners, and questioning the old man.

The boys strained their ears to catch the sentences that penetrated through the thin partition.

They could not understand much at first, but finally they heard Bolton declare:

"I'm awful sorry you told anything about that treasure on Malador Island. But I don't know that it matters, now, for I've got the young scamps snug and tight, and they'll not get away in a hurry."

"If they should get away, though?"

The darky's reply could not be caught.

It seemed plain, however, that Lee Bolton did not desire the boys to go to Malador Island.

"Do you know where that island is?" Mat whispered.

Phil Darrow nodded.

"I think I do. It's in the Gulf of Mexico, not far off the mainland, and I don't think it's a terrible long way from here! I don't know, though, exactly; but we could find it!"

"If we got the chance," Mat replied, gloomily enough.

Again they heard Bolton's voice:

"I guess I'd better bundle him right back to jail. It'll be the safest. He'll get a long sentence for taking that money from me!"

"What's Bolton to that old witch-doctor, anyway?" Phil thoughtfully queried.

The question opened a suggestive train of reflection.

Plainly the captain of the *Southern Cross* and the old voodooist were not strangers. They had had previous dealings. The captain was familiar with the house, and had sent his servant there with a letter.

In addition, here was the captain himself, who had appeared at a most inopportune time for the boys.

How did the captain chance to be there? Why had he come? Had he been able to warn the witch-doctor that the boys were in the vicinity? Surely the witch-doctor had not sent for Lee Bolton, anticipating he might need his help, or to enable Bolton to capture the boys?

In trying to get at the facts, they found themselves suddenly plunged into a maze of perplexity.

Though speculation seemed useless, they continued to touch on the mystery from time to time, whenever Bolton's voice was stilled.

Finally the talk in the adjoining room ceased, and they heard the two men go out.

Left thus alone, the boys began to tug and strain at their bonds. They heard the dog whimpering under the house, but not another sound.

The owl stared at them now and then from his queer perch, and cocked his large head sideways in a most knowing manner; but he was a very discreet owl, and did not hoot out an alarm when he saw the boys twisting and writhing.

Though they pulled and panted, and strove with such desperate energy that the cords were driven cruelly into the flesh, and the sweat made to pour in streams from their faces, their efforts were unavailing.

They only succeeded in sinking the cords deeper and deeper and in drawing the knots tighter and tighter.

"I give it up!" Mat panted, at last, with a very red and disconsolate face. "We'll just have to stay here till Bolton comes for us."

CHAPTER XV.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

"Hark!"

It was a whispered exclamation from Phil Darrow.

Phil had been lying for a long time with his head against the floor, finding that attitude easiest.

A number of hours had passed, during which no sound had come except the whimpering of the dog, which had evidently been again tied up.

No human foot had passed the threshold, and no human being seemed near.

The boys had ceased to strain at their bonds, having discovered how utterly futile were such attempts.

Phil sat up, as the exclamation passed his lips, and looked expectantly toward the door, for the sound which had attracted him had apparently come from that direction.

Mat Ducro rolled over and looked the same way.

They knew not what to anticipate.

Then the open doorway was darkened, and M'liss stole into the room.

She was shoeless, and her footsteps were almost noiseless. Her eyes shone excitedly, and in one hand she carried a knife. It was a long dirk with a keen blade.

A look of fear swept over the faces of the helpless prisoners. Did she mean to slay them with that big knife? She had assisted them once, but that was before they had done anything to anger her or her father.

She stopped, hesitatingly, in the middle of the floor, and bent her head to listen.

Then she came on again, as if reassured.

Her crouching attitude, her glittering eyes, and the shining blade in her hand, were not calculated to soothe the nerves of the terrified boys.

But when the girl drew nearer, they saw there was no anger in her face.

"Marse Bolton and paw are bofe gone away," she whispered, sinking down at Phil's side. "Dey ar' oveh in de little terbacker patch; but I don't know how soon dey'll be comin' back!"

With this, she drew the keen blade of the dirk across the cords that held Phil's hands.

"You are going to let us loose?" the lad whispered, in a thrill of ecstasy.

"Don' you neveh breave ob dis heah what I'm a-doin' foh yo', boy!" she cautioned, the dirk falling again and again. "Marse Bolton 'u'd kill me, sho'; an' paw 'u'd whup me in a inch o' my life."

Both were eager in their promises of strict secrecy, and she slashed away until Phil was free.

After this she turned to Mat, and served him in the same manner.

Then she thrust the keen knife into Mat's hand.

"Tek dis heah! Mebbe you'll need it 'fo' you gits away!"

The boys were wild to rush from the room, but she restrained them with a gesture, and went alone to the door.

When she had satisfied herself that the coast was still clear, she beckoned to them.

"Dah's de gate, an' yonder is de woods. I reckon yo' kin fin' de boat. Look out foh de 'gators!"

They thanked her, then hurried through the gate and ran with breathless haste for the shelter of the woods. But their limbs were so stiff and swollen that their progress was at best slow.

When they had gained the dark cover they looked back at the house.

They saw M'liss glide into the timber in another direction, and knew that she meant to remain away from the house until her father's anger had time to cool, or until the departure of Lee Bolton.

A short time was required to restore the circulation, so that they could walk with anything like ease, and then they hastened down the dim path toward the lagoon.

They found the boat where it had been left by the girl, and leaped into it, heedless of the alligators. They much preferred the perils of the lagoon to what they were leaving.

The big barge, however, was a much safer craft than the little boat in which they had first endeavored to cross.

The alligators were aroused by the movement of the barge, and swarmed around in as vicious a manner as before.

They made savage dashes, too, at the pole which the boys were using, but no mishap befell the scared navigators, and the opposite shore was soon gained.

But before that was accomplished there fell on their ears the deep baying of the bloodhound.

"The dog can't trail us across the water," Mat suggested, trying to be hopeful.

"No; but he can lead 'em to the water. And when they get there, they can see the boat on this side, and then the dog can pick up our tracks again."

There was only one thing that promised safety. The barge was on their side of the lagoon, and, with that lagoon swarming with alligators, their pursuers could not cross until another boat was secured.

Clutching at this straw, the boys dived into the forest again, and rushed away for dear life.

They feared to continue straight on, and turned from the path at the first favorable opportunity, plunging into the depths of the untried wilderness.

However, they kept as near as they could in the direction of the gypsy camp, and tore through the creepers and intervening plants with savage fury.

It was a mistake to leave the well-trodden path for the morasses and the choked animal trails, and this they were not long in discovering.

It was too late to turn back, though, and so they fought their way foot by foot and yard by yard until their clothing was torn and their hands scratched and bleeding.

Then there sounded again the deep bay of the hound, and they knew that the lagoon had been crossed and that the dog was again following them.

They had accomplished a considerable distance, however, in spite of the many difficulties, and they were more encouraged now, when they saw that the woods were gradually opening and the detaining vines less numerous.

Mat clung to the knife, which he had used to good advantage in opening a way through the thickets of the jungle, and he now hacked again at the creepers in his struggle to gain the higher ground.

The worst of the path was already behind them.

That keen dirk was an inestimable treasure, and the time might quickly come when Mat would wish to use it against something fiercer and more savage than the vines of the forest.

When the jungle had been cleared and the woodland lay open before them, they sprang away with an increasing hope. Ten minutes later they felt sure that their pursuers had missed them entirely.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CRY FOR HELP.

Much as he feared the gypsies, Mat was anxious to see Mother Ferola again.

He wanted to tell her of the occurrences at the home of the witch-doctor, and of the intimacy which existed between Bolton and the old darky.

In spite of the many excitements which had attended their return to the camp, Mat had dwelt frequently on the mysteries suggested by the events at the witch-doctor's house.

He had turned all the known facts over and over in his mind, without being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion, and he wondered now how much information Mother Ferola possessed on these subjects, and if she would be kind enough to clear away any of the puzzles.

At any rate, he meant to question her, if the opportunity presented.

At last the boys came in sight of the camp-fires and the shabby tents.

They feared to enter in a bold and open way—or rather, Mat feared to do so—and so they slipped, with much stealth, up to the tent which Mother Ferola usually occupied.

Some of the men who had sought to seize Mat and turn him over to the authorities, for the purpose of gaining the reward offered by Bolton, were visible about one of the fires.

They were an ill-favored set, and inclined to hold themselves

aloof from the other gypsies. Frequently they had refused to acknowledge the dominion of Mother Ferola, who was a kind of queen over this particular band, though that dominion was recognized by every one else.

To their great joy the boys found Mother Ferola in the tent, and when they had shaken the flap and thus drawn her attention and invitation, they softly entered.

She was much surprised at their coming, and looked at them in mute inquiry.

She was more surprised, too, to see that they had washed away the disguising pigment.

All this demanded explanation, which Phil quickly gave.

The gypsy woman listened attentively to Phil's rather remarkable story, and did not try to question him, until he had ended his recital.

It was very plain, though, to the boys, as they watched her flashing eyes, that she was much disturbed by what she heard, and also somewhat mystified.

"So you found Lee Bolton there? It's been a long time since I've seen or heard anything of him. I used to know Lee Bolton, but that was a good while ago."

She paused and looked at them, as if fearing she had said too much.

Immediately Mat poured into her ears the questions that had troubled him all day.

A pained look came into her face, and again her black eyes shone; but she shook her head.

"You ask me to tell you things I can't."

This was said in an uncertain, hesitating way, that told Mat she would not, instead of could not. It told him that she knew a great many things concerning Lee Bolton and the witch-doctor.

And her expression of countenance showed that, amid the strange thoughts that probably lay deep in her heart, there were some which rankled and stung.

"Some other time I may know more and be able to tell you more," she apologized.

"Will that time come soon, Mother Ferola?" pleadingly questioned Mat.

"Maybe! Maybe! I shall have to look into this thing!"

Then she turned from the subject.

"And now, what are you boys going to do? Phil ought to stay here by rights, but it won't be safe for Mat to stay."

"There's nothing I can do here," said Phil. "If Mat goes, I'll go, too. I'd like to see that Malador Island!"

Again the puzzled light came into her eyes.

She shook her head.

"Malador Island, did you say? Where is it?"

"Out in the Gulf, I think; not far from the mainland."

"Near the oyster reefs, I suppose; and likely oyster boats visit it!" she commented. "I'm sorry he didn't get to tell you the rest of the fortune. That might have been better and more to the point."

Mat could see that the gypsy woman fancied the witch-doctor knew something of his past which would probably have been incorporated into the so-called fortune.

His regret was as great as hers, that the continuation of the fortune had been interrupted.

But that could not be helped now.

He had hoped that the missing knowledge would be supplied by the gypsy, but he saw that she had no such intention, at the present, no matter how much she knew.

"I don't know whether to tell you to go to Malador Island, or to stay away from it," she averred.

Mat, however, had made up his mind to pay the island a visit at the first opportunity, and Phil was equally anxious.

"Then you'd better go to the city and make your way from there to the island," she advised, when informed of this. "It will be the safest way, and likely the only way."

"But you want to keep your eyes open for Bolton and that lawyer, and also the police. Better not go out into the town any, but hang around slyly and try to get on an oyster boat."

She seemed willing that they should risk something to learn certain facts, which either she could not or would not supply.

It was out of the question for the boys to start for the city at once. They were thoroughly beat out and had had nothing to eat all day.

Learning this, she called Meg Marvel, and when the girl came into the tent, she was told to keep her mouth closed about the boys being there, and to bring them in some food.

Meg Marvel was a girl of discretion, and kindly disposed toward Mat because of the risk he had taken in her behalf.

She performed the task imposed on her with much good sense, completely avoiding anything to attract suspicion to Mother Ferola's tent.

The men about the camp-fire smoked and talked on, and the boys devoured the food brought them, while Meg stood out in the shadows, ready to whisper an alarm if there came any need.

The danger the boys might be in from the intrusion of Bolton or the witch-doctor into the camp had been duly discussed.

Should Bolton come and stimulate the men to a search of the camp, Mother Ferola's tent could hardly go untouched, even though she was in authority there.

However, nothing of that kind occurred, and the boys finished their supper in peace.

Then it was arranged that they should try to sleep till about midnight, and that Meg and the gypsy woman should continue the watch together.

Immediately upon lying down the boys dropped asleep, so exhausted were they; and the time was considerably after the hour named when Mother Ferola awoke them.

"I thought you ought to have all the rest you could get," she said, as the boys sat up, feeling very grumpy and drowsy, and rubbing hard at their eyes.

"It won't do for you to stay here too long, you know. The camp's all quiet now, and you won't have any trouble in getting away."

"Better follow the big lagoon that leads toward Pontchartrain. It begins a mile below here, and you can go all the distance by water. I've had a boat left there for you, and Meg will take you to it."

The gypsy girl was hovering near, anxious to be of assistance.

Mother Ferola then put a small sum of money into the hand of each boy, and gave them further directions.

All this was so kind of her that Mat was overwhelmed with gratitude.

"Maybe you can pay me back some day," she said, significantly. "But it's all right, even if you don't. I hope you'll get to the city all right, and that Mat'll keep out of the hands of the police."

Then she lifted the curtain at the rear of the tent, and the boys stole away, under the girl's guidance, with Mother Ferola's kindly words sounding in their ears.

As Meg Marvel had seen the boat on the shore of the lagoon only an hour or two before, she had no difficulty in finding it. She led the way by the most direct route, and the lagoon was soon reached.

It was not a large boat, and was fitted with only one pair of oars, but it was stanch and safe.

The boys agreed to take turns at rowing, and when they had seated themselves, Meg pushed the boat out into the water.

They feared to shout back to her, but Mat waved his hat at her in the gloom, and then the darkness swallowed her from sight.

A slight current was perceptible, setting toward Lake Pontchartrain, and this enabled them to be sure they were going at all times in the proper direction.

The lagoon was wide and shallow, and the young voyagers sincerely hoped it was not filled with alligators. They had had enough of these wicked saurians to last them a long time.

They were not pleased, however, when, after rowing on for a mile or two, they saw timber on the shore of the lagoon, and felt sure it betokened the outskirts of the Phantom Forest.

An alligator was heard to bellow, now and then, making a most prodigious and fear-inspiring noise, and Mat, who was at the oars, pulled the boat farther from the forbidding shore. In doing so, he threw the boat into a stronger current, which swept it along for half a mile.

Then its course was checked, and in a little while he found himself pulling hard without making any progress.

The boat had been driven into a floating island of lily pads and other aquatic plants, and his endeavors to drive it through the obstruction only fastened it the more securely.

A heavy fog was settling about them, and the darkness was intense.

The boys used their utmost strength to push the boat on, but it had become wedged, and, in addition, they lost all idea of direction in a short time.

Thus forced to remain in that uncomfortable condition until the coming of daylight, they drew over them a tarpaulin, which they

found in the bottom of the boat, and sought a few more winks of much-needed sleep.

The sun was shining and the fog had cleared away when they awoke, shook the accumulated water from the tarpaulin, and crawled out of their cramped berth.

The extent of the aquatic island was ascertainable now, and they had no great difficulty in working the boat out of it.

Anxious to be on their way, they pulled the boat again into the current, which ran now near the shore of the forest.

Then there arose, not far distant, a loud outcry for help.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FIN OF A MAN-EATER.

"There's somebody being murdered up there!" Phil declared, standing up in the boat in a vain endeavor to see.

The cries were loud and heartrending, and there came, also, the sounds of heavy and apparently cruel blows.

Almost involuntarily Mat had driven the boat toward the shore, and its prow now bumped against the yielding soil.

Phil leaped out, drew in on the boat, and twisted the painter around a root.

"I'm going to see what that means."

Mat, who was equally stirred, followed him instantly.

The cries for help still resounded.

They came from a short distance inland, however, and the lift of the land from the lagoon kept the boys from seeing anything.

But as soon as Mat and Phil gained the top of the rise, they beheld a sight which sent the blood bounding through every vein.

Lee Bolton was standing over the prostrate form of the witch doctor's daughter, M'Iss, beating her most cruelly.

The weapon used was a slender pole, cut from a nearby thicket, and every blow must have left its mark.

M'Iss was howling in pain and bawling for assistance, and putting up her hands pleadingly at every stroke.

But the cruel stick came down without mercy.

M'Iss had been sent that morning, by her father, to gather herbs near the lagoon, and there Bolton had encountered her.

The captain was on his way toward the city. He had passed the night at the witch doctor's, and had scarcely slept, so great had been his uneasiness over the escape of the boys and his anger at the treachery of M'Iss.

He had not dared lay hands on her, however, while under her father's roof, though he had expressed himself rather strongly concerning her conduct.

M'Iss had been driven into a confession, and the witch doctor had agreed to properly punish her, but Lee Bolton, when he beheld her alone near the lagoon, could not forbear the opportunity to wreak on her his spiteful vengeance.

Remembering M'Iss' kindness, and driven on by the heedless impetuosity of youth, the boys rushed at Lee Bolton, picking up sticks as they ran.

Fortunately Bolton did not see them, and M'Iss' howls kept him from hearing their footsteps.

So that the first thing the captain of the *Southern Cross* knew of their presence was a stinging blow on the back of the head that knocked him prostrate.

He fell on his face, and, rolling over and seeing who his assailants were, he tried to get out his revolver.

It was Mat's club that dealt the first blow, and now Phil's came down, knocking the redoubtable captain into insensibility.

M'Iss leaped up, smarting with pain and anger.

She eyed the boys in speechless amazement.

"I cl'ar to goodness!" was all she could say.

Bolton was already showing signs of returning consciousness.

"Have you anything to tie him with?" Mat asked. "If you have, get it quick, and then run for the house!"

M'Iss dashed a hand across her eyes, ran to a bush and began to strip it of its bark.

"Good mos' es a rope!" she said, coming back with it.

She saw Bolton give a flounce and try to rise, and her eyes again bulged with terror.

Mat and Phil knew they must act quickly, and they threw themselves on Bolton and securely bound him.

This had hardly been performed when he came back to a knowledge of what had occurred, and glared at them with looks of vindictive hate.

M'Iss shivered and put a respectful distance between herself and her late tormentor.

"He's safe enough," Mat grinned. "If somebody don't untie him, he'll lay there quite a while."

They wondered if they ought to possess themselves of his revolver, but when he began to rave, they did not care to go near him, and walked away without it.

"We don't need it," Mat suggested, "and we'll hope that he won't get any chance to use it on us."

M'Iss was already flying through the woods toward home.

Fearing that Bolton might find some means to release himself, and thus make it uncomfortable for them, they hastily re-entered the boat and pulled from the vicinity.

They took turns at rowing, as they had before, and sent the boat forward at a good rate of speed, and soon were a mile or more down the lagoon.

They pictured the captain raging against them in the depths of the woods, and this did not incline them to cease their efforts.

However, when an hour or two had passed, their fears became less acute, and they pulled on more leisurely.

An hour before sunset they beheld open water in front of them, which they supposed to be Lake Pontchartrain, and they rowed boldly out into it.

But they were quickly undeceived. The waves ran too high for those of Pontchartrain, on a comparatively calm day, as this was.

The lagoon led into the sea, instead of into the lake, or else they had, at some point, taken a wrong channel. This last they might easily have done.

It was too late to speculate concerning this, and they looked about to know what to do.

The tide was running out, and before they were aware of it, the little boat was caught in the swirling current that sucked around a sandy mound—it scarcely could have been called an island—and their position became perilous.

Mat, who was at the oars, tried to pull the boat out of the current, but before he could accomplish anything, a big wave, sweeping from seaward, bore down on them.

It rose higher and higher, like a rushing wall, then broke into a line of white foam on its crest, and hurled its huge bulk over the little boat.

The boat filled and went down in an instant, and the boys were left struggling in the water.

Mat struck out bravely for shore, then halted to see how Phil was faring.

Phil was not so good a swimmer, but he was struggling gallantly.

Then or fifteen minutes later, when the land was not over fifty yards distant, Mat undertook to assist Phil in making a landing.

He found it hard work, though, with the current against him, but a desperate struggle accomplished it.

Both were so exhausted, however, when the beach was gained that they had only strength to crawl out of reach of the lapping waves, and there they lay until their energies in a measure returned.

Though they were hungry, they had nothing to eat, and when Mat had made a study of the sky and the shore to determine the proper direction, they set off through the woods.

It was a sandy, pine-covered region, with many patches of scrub palmetto, and very little shade, and the sun beat mercilessly down on their uncovered heads.

There were a few jungly, water-filled ravines, where hordes of mosquitoes attacked them, so that, with the heavy walking, the journey was far from pleasant.

But they toiled manfully on, with a glimpse now and then of the salt water.

There was no sign of life, human or animal, and they were dropping into a despairing mood, when they came to what seemed a large arm of the sea.

Probably it was one of those curious passages, connecting the Gulf with the Louisiana lakes, known as "The Rigolets."

A cry of joyful surprise rose to the lips of the tired boys.

A small sloop was anchored a short distance from the beach, and on the shore a man was sitting before a pine-knot fire.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE GRIP OF A NORTHEASTER.

Hoping for a kindly reception, Mat and Phil walked up to the fire and made their presence known.

When the stranger got up, they saw before them a small man,

of forty-five or fifty, with a sailor look, who introduced himself as Jim Cutter.

Cutter was an oysterman, owning the sloop *Mattie B.*, of New Orleans, and had been gathering oysters on a reef hard by.

He had brought a young man out with him from New Orleans, but the lad had got tired of work and departed, leaving Cutter to continue his work alone.

Cutter had been gunning in a ravine not far distant, and the fruits of his venture—three or four gray squirrels—were roasting on sticks before the fire.

He welcomed the boys to seats at his side, and, after mutual introductions and explanations, he told them his toil on the reef had paid poorly, and that he meant to leave the place in the morning.

"Which way are you going?" Mat questioned.

"Out toward Cat Island."

"Is that anywhere near Malador Island?"

"Fifteen or twenty miles from it, I reckon. You boys thinking of going to Malador?"

Mat did not wish to reveal his hand too rashly.

"We don't know," he said. "It all depends. What sort of a place is Malador Island?"

"Not much of a place at all," Cutter replied. "There's some worked-out oyster beds near it, and some fishermen lived on it once, but I think it's abandoned now."

"No one lives there at all?"

Cutter shook his head.

"I ain't been there in a good while. I don't think you'll find any company there, though."

Mat and Phil were wondering, then, how they would ever be able to reach the island.

Cutter seemed to divine their thoughts.

"You may get from Cat Island in an oyster boat; or, if you're dead sure you want to be put ashore, I might manage it."

This led to a general talk, and before the squirrels were well done, Mat and Phil had agreed to pay Jim Cutter seven dollars if he would take them to Malador Island, and return for them in his sloop at the end of three days from the time of their landing there.

"Seeing that you're to be my passengers," and Cutter got up and brushed the sand from his trousers, "we might well go aboard. These squirrels won't make a square meal for all of us, fer I kin see that you chaps are hungry."

They admitted that they were as hungry as wolves, and when Cutter had rolled the squirrels in a bit of cloth, and kicked the fire asunder, he led the way to the sloop's boat.

It was drawn up on the sand.

Cutter shoved it into the water, told the boys to jump in, then followed more leisurely, and pulled off toward the sloop.

Once on board, they were conducted to the cuddy, a wee bit of cabin under the deck.

Near this cabin was an open space, with a charcoal furnace, and in this furnace a fire was soon built.

Some bread was brought out, and a pot of coffee prepared, which, with an abundance of raw oysters and the squirrels, supplied the half-starved boys with a glorious meal.

Afterward, they sat on the deck in the pleasant night air, and talked of the various islands along the Gulf coast, turning their attention particularly to the one known as Malador Island.

The splendid supper and a good night's sleep made new boys of Phil and Mat.

They went to work willingly in getting the sloop under way, and though Phil understood little enough of the art of navigating even so simple a boat as a sloop, he found he could render acceptable service in many ways.

Mat was in his element. He knew every rope and canvas by name—was, in fact, as good a sailor as Jim Cutter, and, above all, he was in a fair way to solve the mystery clinging about Malador Island, and learn what of truth there was in the words of the witch-doctor.

The *Mattie B.* was not the fastest sloop on the Gulf, as the boys were quick to discover, but she got over the water after a fashion, and might even have sailed around the world had time enough been given and storms held off.

The *Mattie B.* was also old, and not very seaworthy.

But all this troubled the boys very little.

All went well enough until mid-afternoon.

Then the wind hauled into the northeast, and a squall developed.

It was near the season when violent hurricanes sweep the Gulf. For near an hour Jim Cutter had been anxiously watching the sky, though he had not expressed his fears to the boys.

He had been hoping to get under the lee of a certain island, where he knew the sloop could find fair shelter and good holding ground, but he now saw he should not be able to make it.

"We've got to prepare for a blow!" was his declaration, speaking to Mat, who was at the tiller.

Then the head of the sloop was brought to the wind, the jib lowered and the mainsail reefed.

The gaff was hoisted well up, the jib set again, and under the jib and close-reefed mainsail, the sloop kept away on her course.

But the wind blew harder and harder, and the waves began to roll and pound with fierce energy.

However, the sloop was well managed.

Jim Cutter was studying the sky again.

"This ain't goin' to be no cat's-paw business," was his anxious averment. "If it don't blow us out of the water before morning, I miss my guess."

Still, he held on his way, thinking he might make Cat Island before the worst of the storm came.

Blue-black grew the clouds out over the northern horizon, and the wind became colder. The belying mainsail, closed reefed as it was, threw the staggering sloop well over.

There was a good ballast of oysters on board, however, and Jim Cutter thought it wise to let her draw all the sail she could.

Phil became so seasick in a little while that he was forced to crawl into a berth in the little cuddy, where he remained for a long time, feeling that his last hours had come.

"I think we're well off Malador Island," Cutter announced, when an hour or more had passed, crouching at Mat's side. "Keep her to starboard! There—so!"

Mat stared in the direction indicated, hoping to catch a glimpse of the island that had so long occupied his thoughts.

The blue-black clouds shut out everything, and the wind almost took his breath.

The lightning was beginning to play, too, and the thunder to reverberate like the booming of cannon.

"Ain't no chance of settin' you on Malador this night," Cutter grinned. "I'll have to run back here, if I earn my seven dollars!"

The grin was a sickly one. Jim Cutter knew, as well as any man alive, that the chances were not very good for any of them to ever see Malador Island.

At this moment, Phil Darrow crawled out of the cuddy, very white and weak. He could not endure to remain in there any longer, and felt that, if die he must, he preferred to die where he could behold the sea, and the sky, and a human face.

It was impossible to carry the jib longer, and it was furled snug.

Cutter tried to set a small storm-jib from the stem of the sloop, but failed.

As if it had waited until all its energies could be gathered and hurled at once on the devoted vessel, the storm seemed now to leap on them like a maddened creature.

The thunder crashed and bellowed, the wind blew with a fury that was appalling, and the waves rolled mountainously.

Mat thought he had seen storms, but never such as this.

Cutter, realizing that the harbor sought could never be reached, and that something must be done instantly, put the sloop about and ran for Malador Island.

He thought it safer to try and beach the sloop than to keep out to sea.

Scarcely had he done so, when there came a slight calm, and the gale hauled into the southeast.

The interval was well used by the *Mattie B.*, and if Jim Cutter had not been mistaken in his estimate of the distance to be covered, and also in his exact location, all might have gone well.

Cutter fancied he knew just where he was, and that a protecting arm of the island, which reached seaward, could its lee side be gained, would bring them safety.

He ran for this supposed harbor, and then the southeast gale caught the *Mattie B.* and twisted her about like a boat of cork.

She was lifted high and hurled violently forward—a terrible shock followed, which prostrated every one on board; the mast snapped and went over, dragging and bumping against her sides, and her fate was sealed.

She had struck on a reef, and almost immediately water began to make its way in.

Mat scrambled to his feet and looked about for Phil.

Phil was clinging blindly to some object; and then Mat, glancing seaward, beheld another tremendous wave rushing upon them.

Before he could do more than shout a warning, and lay hold of a rope, the wave hurled itself across the sloop with Titanic force, sweeping the deck from stern to stern.

That wave caught Mat on its breast and carried him into the boiling sea, and his despairing cry came back to those on the sloop like the herald of their own doom.

CHAPTER XIX.

CAST ON MALADOR ISLAND.

Mat Ducro, borne overboard by that awful wave, was ready to give himself up for lost, but a cask had accompanied him, which he now seized and clung to with frenzied grasp.

Other pieces of timber, torn from the ill-fated sloop, churned for an instant about him.

Then the high waves and the blinding scud hid the sloop from sight.

Mat was sure the sloop could not hold together long, but he had no time to think of any one but himself.

The big waves caught him up and hurled him on—churned him around and around, as if they sought to wrest the cask from him—and now and then buried him out of sight.

But he never relaxed his grip, knowing the cask to be his only hope of salvation. To try to swim in such a sea would be sheer madness.

He knew not whither he was being driven, except for the statement of Jim Cutter that Malador Island lay off there somewhere.

How far it might be, or whether he would be able to reach it, he did not ask. He was too nearly drowned, and too nearly dead of fright and exhaustion.

Above the roar of the storm, he heard what he believed to be the booming of breakers.

Then a wave caught him again, carried him forward on its white crest, and when it receded, hissing and angry at the escape of its prey, Mat and the precious cask lay sprawled in a mass of bushes.

All around were broken tree trunks, twisted boughs and wreckage of various kinds, together with heaps of sand and a mountainous lather of sea foam.

More dead than alive, Mat staggered to his feet, ran a few steps, then reeled and fell in a half faint.

Again he heard the thunder of the surf—not against a coral reef, but against the sandy shore of Malador Island.

The storm continued to rage in furious and wild grandeur; the trees on the island writhed and groaned, and giant trunks snapped asunder like pipe-stems.

The air was filled with a deadly mass of flying *débris*, and the premature darkness grew blacker and blacker, while the storm howled in keener and keener notes.

Surrounded by all this horror, Mat Ducro lost consciousness again.

Perhaps the chill and the exhaustion overcame him.

How many hours he remained in that condition he did not know.

When he came out of it, the wind was dying, though the surf still rolled thunderously.

The darkness was above him, the darkness of night; but a lightning flash came now and then to relieve it, and revealed the tangled mass of trees and boughs that strewed the shore.

He could not believe that any one else had escaped from the wreck of the sloop.

He knew the sloop had been beaten to pieces, and he pictured Phil Darrow and Jim Cutter as lying dead at the bottom of the Gulf, or on the sandy beach.

He did not try to rise from his position for a long time. He knew he could do nothing, and he was so nearly dead he had not enough energy to try.

Thus the hours went by, and it seemed the weary night would never draw to a close.

Through Mat's misty thoughts ran a feeling of remorse. It was his influence that had induced Phil to leave his home and friends at the gypsy camp.

He seemed destined to bring nothing but tribulation and hardship to the boy who had befriended him at a time when he most

needed friends; and now—and Mat chilled at the horror of it—he had brought to that truest friend of his friendless life death!

Before daybreak the wind died out, and the waves ceased to pound on the sandy shore with such violence.

At the first break of dawn, Mat crawled, rather than walked, to the shore, and stared out toward the point where the sloop ought to be, if she still held together.

It was scarcely light enough to see, and he sank down on the sand, with his eyes fixed in that direction.

Finally, day broke fully, and the sun came up, shining redly over the waste of waters.

Mat uttered a low cry of despair.

The sloop was gone!

Although he had not expected to see it there, he had clung with blind faith to the hope that, somehow or other, it might have weathered the gale.

He was sure now that both Phil and Cutter were lost, and, with this assurance, his distress became almost unbearable.

He walked up the narrow strip of sandy beach, looking everywhere for some trace of his friends.

On turning a head of the island, Mat halted, with a start of surprise.

A feeble cry welled to his lips.

Before him, in a shallow sort of bay, but with two or three hundred yards of water between it and the shore, was the *Mattie B.*, or what remained of her.

The forward part of the sloop had been beaten away, so that a great hole showed, and stem and bowsprit were gone, but the body of the vessel had hung together and been driven into that bay, where it now lay aground.

But strangest of all, and the thing that drew the cry from Mat's lips, was the figure he beheld on the wreck of the sloop.

"Phil Darrow!" he gasped.

Then he ran forward and waved his hands. The sight of Phil put new life and strength into him.

Mat might have waved his hat, but he had been hatless for so long a time—having had nothing but a handkerchief for a head covering while on board the sloop—that he felt as if he had always gone bareheaded.

Again his cry rang out, and with much more strength and intensity.

The despairing boy on the sloop heard the cry, and beheld the figure, with the waving arms, on the beach.

He started up, waved his hands in return, and sent back an answering shout.

No one else appeared aboard, however, and Mat felt sure Cutter was not with Phil.

"Why don't you try to swim ashore?" Mat bawled, when he was on the beach opposite the wreck.

Fear had kept Phil from attempting this. He distrusted his swimming powers, and the sight of a wheeling porpoise reminded him too strongly of his experience with the shark.

When Mat was hurled overboard, Phil managed to cling to the sloop. Hurled backward into the cockpit, he had held on there until the great wave had passed.

Then he had heard Cutter calling, and had replied.

Cutter had been thrown from the cockpit, but now crawled back into it, while another wave lifted the vessel.

For a few minutes the sloop bumped and pounded on the reef, then was borne high aloft by a wave that fell with a tremendous crash.

Phil then became dimly aware that Cutter was gone, and it seemed to him that the sloop was spinning around and around like a top.

So sick and giddy that he knew not what was occurring, and scarcely cared if he lived or died, he yet managed to crawl into the cuddy, where he remained, constantly expecting the sloop to go to the bottom.

Phil's memory of the storm was but a nightmare of hideous fears, and ever since the storm had abated, he had been clinging to the wreck, almost sorry that he, too, had not been engulfed.

But now he was stimulated to renewed hope and activity, and, standing up, he shouted back his replies to Mat's interrogatories.

"Try to tear off some of those planks and make a raft! Tie the boards together with rope! I think you can make a raft that will bring you to shore!"

Phil could have kicked himself for not having thought of that before. Without a boat, swimming had been the only plan that had suggested itself.

Every loose board had been torn from the *Mattie B.*, but a search of the wreck brought to light an ax, and with it Phil knocked a couple of boards loose.

When he had secured a dozen or so, he bound them securely, with an unlimited quantity of rope, all under Mat's directions, and lowered the clumsy raft overboard.

A rope kept it from drifting away, and down this rope Phil carefully climbed.

Then he cut the rope, took up a bit of plank he had brought for a paddle, and permitted the waves to drive him toward the shore.

He was delighted with the ease with which his rescue was being accomplished, and when the shore was gained, he threw up his hands and shouted and danced for very joy.

Two such happy and excited boys are seldom found. There was now but one bitter regret, and that was for Jim Cutter. He had proven a friend, and a kind one, and they were sure he was lost.

As soon as their ebullition of spirits had time to subside, they began to talk of their situation and to exchange experiences.

Mat's account of the 'coons and the panther frightened the gypsy boy.

"Let's go back to the sloop," he urged. "I'm afraid to stay all night on the island!"

He gave a scared look into the shadows, where the darkness of night was already gathering, and as he did so, the peculiar scream of the panther echoed across the sands.

CHAPTER XX

DIGGING FOR BURIED TREASURE.

Phil and Mat rushed to the raft, which had been partly drawn up on the beach.

Their thought was that the panther was following Mat, and that it would endeavor to attack them soon.

If there had been any desire on the part of either to remain overnight on the island, that wild scream dissipated it.

It came again, a fear-inspiring sound, resembling more than anything else the despairing scream of a woman.

Hastily the raft was pushed into the water and away from the land, and Mat took up the board which Phil had brought as a paddle.

It was wide and clumsy, and he split it over the sharp end of a plank, thus making two paddles, one for himself and one for his chum.

Both paddles were needed, too, and the strength of both boys was required to drive the clumsy raft back to the sloop.

They did not know but that the panther might swim out and try to get aboard during the night, but were sure they would feel much safer on the wreck than ashore.

As soon as Mat was aboard, he commenced a search for something to eat.

There were plenty of oysters to be found, and he came across a box of crackers and some bread, though the crackers and bread were about spoiled by the salt water.

Fortunately, there was still some charcoal, and the heavy furnace had not gone overboard.

He had found a water keg, which he tapped, but he could find no coffee, nor anything else of much value.

There were matches in a waterproof box in the cuddy, and when the charcoal was burning in the furnace, and the steam of frying oysters arose, Mat and Phil began to feel comfortable once more.

The panther's screams did not come again, though the boys remained awake a long time, fearing the beast might swim out and try to climb aboard.

However, they slept at last, overcome by fatigue.

It was nearly noon when they awoke.

The little bay was as calm as a millpond, and but for the wreck of the sloop, and the wreckage that lined the shore, they could hardly have believed that so terrible a hurricane had been witnessed by the island.

The sloop was so firmly aground there seemed no possibility that the tide could lift it, and after debating as to the course to be pursued, they prepared another hearty meal, and then went ashore on the raft.

They took the ax along, for use against any animals they might encounter, a shovel for digging, and Mat still carried his dirk.

But they saw nothing of the 'coons or of the panther.

They were now on Malador Island, the place they had so desired to reach.

Nevertheless, they were greatly at a loss what to do.

When they had searched the beach for a considerable distance, looking for the body of Jim Cutter, they gave over their efforts in that direction, and tried to recall the outline of the island as seen in the witch-doctor's hut.

"That sign was at one end of the island, and I think at the eastern end," Mat averred. "You remember how the island lay, don't you? The sign was tacked to a pine tree, on a little ridge, and the waves came close up to it. I'd recognize the place if I should see it."

Phil was also sure he should know the place if he came on it, and after some consultation, they walked on in the direction they had been going, hoping to reach that end of the island without much difficulty.

A walk of three hours brought them to the end of the island, and there, sure enough, was a ridge of sand with a pine tree on it, not far from the surf.

The boys were jubilant over this seeming good fortune.

"If Cutter was only with us!" Mat sighed. "I reckon it can't be possible that he's alive somewhere?"

"I'd like to think so, Mat; but I don't believe he is. We'll never see Jim Cutter again."

They surveyed the ridge of sand, wondering at what point they ought to begin work, and though they were filled with pleasant anticipations of what they might find, they did not for a moment forget the fact that they were virtually prisoners on the island, with little prospect of an early escape from it.

Each was inclined to hopefulness, however, and did not permit the unpleasantness of their situation to prey too much on his mind.

The work of digging for the treasure that had been so singularly pointed out to them promised employment that would shorten the hours of their stay, if nothing more.

They believed they were not over five miles from the sloop, for the walking had been heavy, and they agreed to return to it every night, and to bring with them each day enough oysters to supply the demands of their hunger.

When they made a careful survey of the ridge, Mat sank the shovel into the soft sand near the foot of the pine.

"This ought to be the place! You remember the words: 'Here is treasure buried for Matio Ducro!'"

With that, he began to shovel the sand away, exposing the tree root, and when he had wielded the shovel until tired, Phil Darrow took up the work.

They had the best part of the day before them, and they worked with a will; but nowhere, though they dug in a number of places, could they find any indication of the presence of the treasure sought.

They were worn out, and the sun was sinking, when they gave over their unprofitable task in despair.

"There's nothing buried there!" Phil declared. "That fortune was all a fraud! Now, what did the witch-doctor mean by doing that?"

It was a query easier put than answered.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN UNPLEASANT VISITOR.

The next morning, Mat and Phil returned to the pine tree, and spent another day in a search for the buried treasure, with no better success.

Then they began seriously to consider how they were to get off the island.

Malador Island was out of the track of Gulf vessels, and its oyster beds were too nearly fished out to attract oystermen to it. Since the boys had been on the island, not a vessel of any character had been sighted.

It was all too plain now that the pretended "fortune," directing them there for buried treasure, was a fraud of the worst sort. If any treasure had ever been concealed there, it had probably been by Lafitte, or some other pirate of the Gulf, and certainly none of those gentry would ever have placed treasure there for Mat Ducro!

Discuss the subject as much as they would, they could not determine what had made the witch-doctor show them that pre-

tended vision, though they felt certain now that Lee Bolton was, somehow or other, mixed up in the affair.

As nothing remained for them to eat, except the oysters, they got out some fishing lines, which were in the cuddy, and were fortunate enough to catch a few fish.

And thus another day, and another night, wore away.

However, when Mat poked his head out of the cockpit on the ensuing morning, and looked out on the Gulf, as he had done hundreds of times before, he beheld a vessel some distance away.

"Tumble out!" he yelled to Phil. "There's a sloop or a schooner out there, and it's going to pass near the island!"

Phil tumbled out with much eagerness, and together they stared at the strange sail.

It was still a long distance off, and they could not determine its character.

With much haste, a bit of canvas was tied to the stump of the sloop's mast, and then the boys pulled quickly ashore on the raft, where Mat climbed a tree and fastened another bit of canvas to the highest limb.

They were in mortal fear that the vessel would not observe these signals of distress.

But when she came nearer, she tacked, as if she had sighted the flags, and they then saw that she was a small schooner.

Mat and Phil had returned to the sloop, and stood watching her.

Closer in came the schooner, until she was not more than a quarter of a mile away, when the jib was pulled down, and she swung into the wind with her sails shaking, preparatory to casting anchor.

A look of anxiety came to Mat's face. There was a familiar something about the schooner that troubled him.

Into the schooner's boat, which had been towing astern, two men shortly after dropped and pulled for the sloop.

Then Mat shakily clutched the arm of his companion.

"Do you know who that is?" he questioned. "That's Lee Bolton!"

Instantly the boys were in a panic of fear.

They could not believe that Lee Bolton had come to Malador Island in the *Southern Cross* for any good reason.

Their hope of rescue faded, and they ran to the rope that held the raft, intent only on getting ashore and concealing themselves until his departure.

But the schooner's boat, propelled by two pairs of strong arms, came on so rapidly they were not able to carry this into execution.

Mat and Phil got aboard the raft, and made a frantic struggle to reach the shore, but the schooner's boat swept by the wreck of the sloop and overhauled them before the land was gained.

There was an evil sneer on Lee Bolton's face that boded ill for the boys.

"So we have reached a day of reckoning at last!" were his first words.

He had drawn in his oars, and that hateful revolver again shone in his hand.

Mat would have leaped overboard if he had not known that nothing could be accomplished thereby.

Both Mat and Phil had ceased their desperate paddling, and were now looking at Bolton and his companion.

The latter seemed to be a Spaniard, with a low brow and malignant face. There were little rings in his ears, and his yellow teeth showed in a cruel grin.

Lee Bolton laughed coarsely as he looked into the scared faces of the boys, and he altered his tone.

"You oughtn't to try to run away from friends in that fashion! After calling us in here with those flags, then you put for the woods!"

He put away the revolver when he saw the boys could not escape him, and the black shadow settled again on his brow.

"Now, get into this boat, without any monkeying!" he commanded. "If you don't, you'll wish you had! I've got you now where I want you!"

The thoroughly frightened boys lost no time in climbing into the boat, where they cowered beneath Bolton's eye, while the Spaniard slowly pulled back to the wrecked sloop.

Bolton made them tell him whose sloop it had been, and how they had chanced to be in it; and then the boat went on toward the schooner.

When the schooner was gained, the boys were left there, under

charge of the black-browed Spaniard, and Capt. Lee Bolton went back in the boat to the wreck.

Possibly, he thought, there might be some articles of value still in the sloop, for he searched the wreck prettily thoroughly; but, if so, he found nothing, and in half an hour he came back to the schooner.

The boys were on the forward deck, under the Spaniard's eye, and Bolton walked up to them when he came aboard.

"You found the fortune, I s'pose!" sneering, after his repellent fashion. "A splendid fortune it was for Mat Ducro!"

Mat flushed under the taunt, and replied, somewhat hotly:

"We'd never thought of looking for anything of the kind if we hadn't been lied to!"

"Ha! ha! So you're coming to your senses at last! I thought you would, by and by! That old witch-doctor pulled the wool over your eyes first-rate. Who do you s'pose would be burying treasure here for Mat Ducro?"

These statements were not calculated to allay their sense of uneasiness.

"We knowed you wouldn't!" Phil retorted, his black eyes shining angrily.

"I'm surprised that you, a gypsy, should have been gulled by that fake of a doctor!" bending his glance on Phil. "Your experience ought to have told you how much there is in all these 'fortunes'!"

"But I'm not complaining! I've got both of you, and when you get away from me, you'll both be apt to know it!"

He walked back to where the Spaniard was standing, a pleased witness of it all, and began to talk to the Spaniard in low tones.

Phil and Mat knew now how great had been the trick played on them. They had been sent to Malador Island because Lee Bolton wished them sent there, where he would have them the more completely in his power.

It was not pleasant to know they had been thus tricked, but regrets could not serve them.

The more they thought of the witch-doctor, and the things that had occurred at his house, the more they became puzzled, though the explanations were simple enough.

By certain information gained, Lee Bolton became pretty sure that Mat Ducro would be in the neighborhood of the witch-doctor's home, and he sent instructions by the hand of his cook to the old voodooist.

These instructions were that the witch-doctor should take means to lure Mat to his home, where certain pictures were to be shown the boy in the water mirror.

These pictures were on oiled canvas, were prepared by Lee Bolton, and were simply laid, one above the other, in the bottom of the big basin.

The cook brought them to the witch-doctor, and the reader will recall the manner in which the witch-doctor exposed them to the view of the boys.

Bolton was not at all anxious that Mat should be again placed in prison, but was very desirous that Mat should be driven out of the country. With Mat on distant and isolated Malador Island, Bolton knew that he could have his own way with the boy.

And now, having accomplished his purpose thus far, the captain of the *Southern Cross* was inclined to gloat over the manner in which the boys had been tricked, and to take to himself much credit for shrewdness.

The mental condition of Mat and Phil could not have been worse.

They had seen enough of Lee Bolton to know that he was a thoroughly heartless villain, and the fact that he had schemed to get them in his power on distant Malador Island caused them to tremble with fear.

It seemed a very bad indication that he had brought that evil-browed Spaniard, instead of the negro cook. Hardly a second look was required to tell any one that the Spaniard was a murderous cutthroat.

After talking a while together, Bolton and the Spaniard came up to the boys, with ropes, and proceeded to bind them.

"No nonsense!" Bolton admonished, "or I'll tie some chunks of iron to your legs and pitch you overboard!"

His glances told the boys, almost as well as if he had expressed the thought in words, that that was what he meant to do with them, anyway, as soon as the schooner was well out in the Gulf.

When the boys had been securely tied, they were tumbled into

the forward cabin, where they were forced to remain, in a very uncomfortable frame of mind.

All day the *Southern Cross* swung at anchor in the mouth of the little bay, while Lee Bolton made several trips ashore in the boat.

Then, as night began to come on, the anchor was hoisted, and the *Southern Cross* crept out into the wide Gulf.

CHAPTER XXII.

A PLAN OF ESCAPE FRUSTRATED.

The fears of the two boys, Mat and Phil, sensibly increased when the *Southern Cross* got under way.

The semi-darkness below deck was far from pleasant, and it was growing darker down there as the night approached.

Mat's freckled face wore a look of alarm, and this alarm was fully shared by the dark-eyed gypsy boy.

"If I could only have the use of that dirk a minute!" Mat grumbled.

But, alas! the precious dirk, together with everything else of value, had been removed.

They heard Bolton and the Spaniard move about on the deck, and Bolton's orders, and now and then some scrap of talk floated down to them.

They expected no mercy from the captain of the *Southern Cross*, and though they did not yet know the secret spring of his enmity against Mat, they were aware that he had many causes to regard them with disfavor.

They recalled, with distressing distinctness, how they had assaulted him with clubs when they caught him beating M'iss, and how they had left him tied up in the woods.

He had been released, or had succeeded in breaking the bark ropes that held him, and had gone to New Orleans, from whence he had sailed for Malador Island in his schooner.

No words were required to tell them all this, nor were the captain's threats needed to inform them of their present peril.

Sure that Lee Bolton and the Spaniard meant to drop them overboard during the gloom of the night, they began to strain and tug at their bonds. They knew that, once they were hurled into the waters of the Gulf, far from the land, and with weights to their feet, nothing earthly could save them.

They were aware, also, that the captain of the *Southern Cross* could commit the deed with every assurance of security.

No one save Jim Cutter—who was dead—knew they had been near Malador Island. Their capture by the captain and the Spaniard had been witnessed by no human being, and the midnight murder, which they were sure was being contemplated, could by no seeming chance become known.

Their situation was one to appall the stoutest heart.

A few moments' work served to convince them that the cords could neither be untied nor broken, and the discovery filled them with despair.

Mat rolled over with a low moan, and as he did so, his right elbow came in contact with what seemed a sharp bit of iron.

He twisted about, and felt of it, as well as he could, and discovered that it was a rusty anchor.

It was a spare anchor, and had been placed there for some unknown reason.

"Here's something!" he whispered to Phil. "Roll over here and try to saw the rope off your hands on that anchor fluke. I'll try this one!"

There was a thrill in his words that roused the gypsy boy to instant activity.

"What is it?" he inquired, with tremulous excitement. "Can we cut the ropes that way?"

"I don't know! Roll over here and try!"

Mat had already secured a position that enabled him to saw up and down on the rusty anchor fluke with the rope that bound his wrists.

The rope was a stout one, and the work promised to be disheartening. It would take a long time to accomplish anything, and there was the constant danger of discovery.

Nevertheless, Mat sawed away, and Phil, having found the other fluke of the anchor, began a similar task.

The tramp of feet continued to resound above their heads, and snatches of talk still reached them.

The boys worked with feverish energy. Every moment seemed an age.

The rusty flukes were very dull, and the fiber of the ropes the strongest. But perseverance and a dull anchor fluke will eventually conquer even the strongest cable.

Mat had not sawed on the rope five minutes, when one of the strands parted, and this so encouraged him that, though his arms and shoulders ached with the strain, he attacked the remaining strands with redoubled energy.

With whispered exclamations, he incited the gypsy boy to brisk emulation, and in less than a quarter of an hour from the discovery of the rusty anchor, the hands of the boys were free.

Bolton and the Spaniard still trod the deck, and the roll of the schooner showed that the *Southern Cross* had struck the heavy swell of the Gulf.

A brisk breeze was blowing, and the schooner was now making good headway.

The boys scarcely dared breathe, but no sooner were their hands free than they fell to work on the ropes about their ankles.

This was a work of comparative ease, and they were soon able to rise to their feet.

The next thing to be done was to get on deck, and try to slip away in the schooner's boat. They believed the small boat was still being towed, for they had not heard it brought aboard.

Making no more noise than so many cats, Mat and Phil crawled through the narrow companionway, and succeeded in gaining the deck, shielded by the friendly darkness.

With the coming of night, a fog had descended, enveloping the schooner like a sticky cloud.

A lantern was burning forward, and near it they saw a man, whom they believed to be Bolton.

Judging by this that the Spaniard was at the tiller, their hopes increased. They feared him, it is true, but not with the fear with which they regarded Lee Bolton.

They knew that if the small boat was not on the schooner, it was being towed astern.

Sprawled on the deck like shadows—if shadows may be fancied on so shadowless a night—Mat and Phil worked inch by inch toward the stern of the schooner.

They had a well-digested plan. If discovered by the Spaniard, they meant to knock him down and escape in the small boat during the excitement that would ensue.

The Spaniard was smoking a cigarette, whose gleam came now and then, a point of fire in the stygian gloom, serving to reveal his exact location.

The boys kept to the port side, and when the after-cabin was passed and the stern of the schooner reached, Mat lifted himself cautiously and felt for the rope that held the boat.

The Spaniard was crouched at the tiller, near the companionway of the after-cabin.

Mat's extended hand touched the rope, and he began slowly to loosen it from its fastenings.

The gypsy boy was still sprawled on deck, not daring to raise his head.

The rope had been loosened, and Mat was holding it in his hand, when the Spaniard got on his feet, tossed the remnant of the cigarette overboard, left the tiller, and stepped in Mat's direction.

Mat crouched still lower, drawing back toward Phil, but still clung to the rope.

Unfortunately, the Spaniard passed between him and the stern, and, brushing against the rope, pulled it from Mat's grasp.

The frightened boy would have held on with desperate energy, but in the confusion and excitement of the moment he released his hold, feeling that to cling to the rope would inevitably bring discovery.

As the rope slipped overboard, the sound of its fall into the water was drowned by the wash of the waves and the tramp of the Spaniard's feet, and the very last ray of hope fled from the minds of the terrified boys.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE SCHOONER'S HOLD.

All unaware that Mat and Phil were near him, or that the boat was adrift, the Spaniard walked on, halting when a few feet away to light another cigarette.

He was just straightening his cramped limbs, and in a minute came back to the tiller.

But in the meantime the boys had beaten a cautious retreat, knowing that their plan was frustrated.

They were in deeper despair than before. All chance of escape from the schooner was gone, and they were sure that no great time would elapse before the loss of the boat would be known.

After a moment's indecision, they slipped a hatch, crawled into the hold of the schooner, and burrowed as far back as they could.

They could hardly tell what the hold contained, but there was an abominable smell of decayed oysters, and there were boxes and bales and odds and ends of every variety.

They did not trouble themselves about the schooner's contents, being only anxious to get as far as possible from their dreaded enemies.

Pausing at last, they began to discuss the situation, and then they discovered that their condition might be much worse than it was.

"I tell you what," and there was much hopefulness in Mat's tones, "if we couldn't get away in the boat, it's a lucky thing that I let it go adrift. Bolton will not find us where he put us, and he'll think we got away, and he may not hunt for us down here at all."

This put so cheerful an aspect on the situation that the boys began to feel much better.

It did, indeed, seem very probable that, when the captain of the *Southern Cross* became aware of the loss of the boat and the absence of the boys, he would jump to the conclusion mentioned by Mat.

The severed ropes, by which the boys had been bound, would aid in the delusion.

The swell of the sea grew more perceptible, and they judged they were now a considerable distance from Malador Island. What direction the schooner was taking they did not know, but they presumed New Orleans would be its destination.

After a long time, Phil, who was half dying of curiosity, carefully retraced his way toward the deck, to find out, if possible, what was being done by Bolton and the Spaniard.

But he quickly drew down his head like a tortoise backing into its shell when he came to the hatch.

The loss of the boat had been discovered, and Bolton was beginning to rage.

He was cursing the Spaniard for being a stupid idiot, and the Spaniard was jabbering back in scarcely understandable English.

"I'll bet a cent you've been right here and let them boys get away in that boat! If you've done that, Pedro, I'll feel like pitching you overboard!"

Pedro asserted that he had done nothing of the kind, and that the boys were below, though he could not account for the disappearance of the boat.

Fuming with anger, Lee Bolton hastened into the cabin to ascertain if his prisoners were still there.

He snatched up the lantern as he went, and flashed its light over the familiar place.

The severed ropes instantly caught his eye, and forced on him the conviction that the boys had managed to escape, and then his wrath broke out with renewed and volcanic fury.

The frightened gypsy had retreated with all haste to the side of his chum, and the boys now lay shivering, as they listened to this outburst.

After consigning the Spaniard to the power of all the fiends, Capt. Lee Bolton went back on deck, where the boys still heard his raging.

"I tell you, it's lucky I let the boat go!" Mat whispered, cowering at Phil's side. "He may find us, anyway, but he'd have no trouble at all in doing it if he wasn't fooled by the drifting off of the boat!"

Then they heard the rattling of blocks and the straining and creaking of ropes, and knew that the schooner was being brought to, presumably that a search might be the better made.

"That's bad!" said Mat, striving to burrow still deeper behind the boxes and bales. "I'm afraid they's going to look the schooner over."

"Maybe they're going to search for the boat!" Phil suggested. Mat hardly thought so.

Whatever had been Bolton's idea, it was seemingly abandoned, for the schooner soon drew ahead again, though on a new course.

Twice Bolton came down to look at the cut cords and the anchor, but he did not think to search the hold, where the boys were hiding, and the latter became sure, finally, that Bolton was certain they had escaped in the little boat.

The sounds from the deck told them that the schooner was cruising around and around, probably in the vain hope of running across the boat and the escaping prisoners.

Then Mat, who was wise in such things, became convinced that this useless cruising in a circle had been abandoned, and that the schooner was once more being held on a direct course.

All the while the angry voice of Lee Bolton had risen to chill and frighten them.

The Spaniard had been heard to reply at intervals, though Bolton's curses seemed to have greatly cowed him.

For many hours thereafter the schooner held steadily on her way, and two or three hours before daylight she came to anchor.

The anxiety of the boys had kept them awake through all these long hours.

They were sure New Orleans had not been reached, and they wondered why the *Southern Cross* had cast anchor.

Then they heard a boat bump against the schooner's side—heard some one climb to the deck, and soon after caught the voice of the newcomer.

It was a nasal, Jewish voice, and these were the words that floated, with startling emphasis, into the hold:

"Vell, mine goot frient, you have some cargoes dot vos vort' moneys dis time, eh?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

STEALING AWAY.

"More'n you'll carry away in that catboat at one trip, my friend Keltenbaum," Lee Bolton made answer.

Keltenbaum accompanied the captain into the forward cabin, where they continued to talk of the cargo, which, it seemed, the *Southern Cross* had brought for the Jew.

The listening boys were not long in sizing up Keltenbaum.

They discovered that he was a pretended pawnbroker of New Orleans, who was really conducting that business as a blind for criminal operations.

They were also made aware of the fact that the captain of the *Southern Cross* was nothing less than a thief, and a consort of thieves.

Bolton and the pawnbroker, never dreaming that they were overheard, conversed very freely of the schooner's cargo, and its disposal, and the boys strained their ears to catch all that was said.

It appeared that Bolton had collected stolen goods at various points, from members of a certain band of river and Gulf thieves, and that it was Keltenbaum's business to dispose of these goods through his "pawnshop."

The two villains were evidently on the most intimate terms, for when they had talked a while of the schooner's cargo, and the money it would bring, Bolton was heard to remark:

"I had something aboard last night that was worth more to me than a dozen loads of this stuff! You remember the boy?"

"Not dot Madio?"

The queerly pronounced words trembled on the Jew's lips.

"The very same! Matio Ducro, and the gypsy boy that's been running around with him."

"Vere be dey now?"

"I'll give you everything I've got aboard if you'll only tell me! They cut sticks last night, and got away in the boat, after I thought I had them so tight they couldn't wriggle!"

The Jew uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Yes, it's bad!" Bolton admitted. "Desperately bad just now. If I could have dropped them overboard last night, as I intended, I shouldn't have had to worry."

"How much vas dot biece ofe bropery vort', eenyhow?" the Jew questioned.

"Enough to make the boy rich if he gets it. But he'll not get it."

"Dot blandation vas vort' more as den t'ousand, I subbose, py itself, to say noding ofe de rest ofe de bropery, eh?"

"Close to those figures, Keltenbaum. You've an interest of two thousand in the thing, you know, for that money advanced. If I'm beat out of it now, you'll have to whistle for that two thousand."

Mat and the gypsy boy listened in amazement.

Here was something of interest. The key to Bolton's puzzling enmity was being disclosed. Bolton was holding property that rightfully belonged to Mat.

Of this last, there could be no doubt, as the captain and the

Jew continued to talk in the same strain, and though it was an astonishingly strange thing to both Mat and Phil, they could not disbelieve the evidence of their ears.

Property to the value of fifteen or twenty thousand dollars was being held by Bolton, which property would go to Mat if it were known that he still lived. And this was why Bolton had sought to imprison him, to get him out of the way in any manner, even though it involved murder.

After a while, when they got tired of talking, the captain and the pawnbroker went above, leaving the boys to think on what had been heard.

"We've got to get out of here now, if we're to get out at all," Mat whispered, almost as soon as the villainous pair had departed. "Keltenbaum's got a catboat out there, into which this stuff here is to be loaded. When they come to take off the cargo they can't help finding us."

Mat did not need to tell what the result of such a discovery would be. They had heard enough, and had seen enough, of Lee Bolton to know that he would stop at nothing to accomplish his ends.

But to escape from the schooner was the thing that would try them. How could it be accomplished?

Again footsteps were heard on the deck, and by listening intently, Mat and Phil could locate the position of the men who had just left the cabin.

Keltenbaum and Bolton were now standing somewhere near the after-cabin, and it was presumed that the Spaniard was at or near the tiller.

The boys had heard the catboat bump against the port side of the schooner, and well forward.

They did not doubt that the catboat had been secured there, and they began to ask each other if it would be possible to reach the catboat and get away in it.

They did not exactly know the time of night, or rather morning, but they were pretty sure the darkness still held, even though the daylight could not be far off.

They fancied that the work of loading the catboat would be commenced soon, and that, therefore, whatever they accomplished must be done in haste.

With the appearance of daylight, all chance of a successful issue of this new plan would vanish.

Thus reasoning, they crept from their uncomfortable position in the hold, and, in constant fear of discovery, made their way by tediously slow degrees to the deck, slipping the hatch into place after them.

The darkness was not so intense as when they had last been there, but it was still sufficient to shield them.

Lying flat on their faces, waiting for some word or movement to reveal the location of their enemies, the boys heard the catboat bump occasionally against the schooner's side.

But though they intensely desired to rush forward and leap into it, they managed to repress their impatience, and to advance by inches instead of bounds.

Bolton and the Jew were talking of a light which had shone on the shore.

There was not a gleam of any kind now on the schooner, though a lantern must have been exhibited to guide Keltenbaum to it.

"I don't like that," Bolton was heard to declare. "I suppose, though, it's only some hunter's fire. There's no house there!"

The boys did not halt to hear more.

So favorable an opportunity might not come again.

With Bolton and Keltenbaum both gazing landward, and the Spaniard nowhere visible, the much sought chance of escape seemed to have come.

Mat and Phil felt that, if they could gain the catboat, and get it under way, Bolton would hardly be able to overtake them.

The schooner's only boat was gone, and the catboat ought to be able, they reasoned, to make considerable headway before the schooner could be swung around and sent in pursuit.

After what seemed an age, Mat's hand fell on the rope that held the catboat to the side of the larger vessel.

It required only a twist to loose the rope.

"Now drop down there as quietly as you can!" he whispered to Phil.

He gave the gypsy boy an assisting hand, and stood ready to follow him, without a moment's delay.

Steps sounded behind him, and the Spaniard was heard to cry out, in excitement.

Mat knew their attempt had been discovered.

"Push her off!" he whispered to the young gypsy.

Then, without an instant's hesitation, he leaped down into the catboat, bearing the loose end of the rope in his hand.

Phil was acting with the greatest wisdom.

In the catboat was a long pole, used for pushing it through shallow water when there was no wind to fill the sail, and Phil had seized this pole and was bearing hard against the schooner's side with it.

Mat threw the tiller over in the desired direction, and the sail, which had not been lowered, immediately filled, bearing the catboat away from the schooner.

But all this had not been accomplished without bringing indications of excitement from the people on the schooner's deck.

As soon as Pedro bawled that startled warning, Bolton and Keltenbaum ran toward him, shouting out questions.

However, even in the gloom, they quickly became aware that some one was in the catboat, trying to make off with it.

As soon as the catboat was concealed within the fog, Mat again altered the course, hoping thus to baffle those on the schooner.

Very little wind was blowing now, however, and the boat made poor progress.

The schooner drew nearer, and Bolton's orders came with alarming distinctness.

But the schooner passed on, some distance astern, and the boys in the catboat became more encouraged.

Twice after that, Mat changed the direction of the boat, and then sent it landward.

He was not familiar with the shore there, but he feared the fog would lift and the schooner be found between them and a landing place.

Finally, after much careful maneuvering, he succeeded in working the catboat into the mouth of a lagoon, and so close to the land that he and Phil had no difficulty in getting ashore.

They knew the catboat would be found, after a time, by its owner.

To keep it from drifting, they secured it by a cable to a tree, and then they hastened into the woods.

They had very faint ideas of direction, but they walked on and on, until they felt they could walk no longer, and then they crawled into a thicket and went to sleep.

They were thoroughly tired out with the many excitements of the previous day and night, having had no sleep since leaving Malador Island. Nor had they had anything to eat.

The pangs of hunger were great. A ravine had furnished them with some warm and very unwholesome water, and they had chewed at roots and twigs, but at nothing more substantial.

Nevertheless, they slept soundly, though their slumber was of comparatively short duration.

Phil awoke, with a scared cry.

Something cold touched his face, and, with a memory of the witch-doctor's snakes crowding into a quick and spasmodic dream, he leaped excitedly to his feet.

The cold touch had come from the nose of a dog, which now frisked about the two aroused boys with many friendly manifestations.

Almost immediately the bushes parted, and the owner of the dog came into view.

He was a negro, and he grinned amiably when he beheld the frightened faces of the lads.

"Dat ah Ponto neveh bite anything but a hunk o' cawn bread aw a piece eb meat," the darky explained, to allay their fears. "He's de frien'liest dawg you kin fin'. Come head, Ponto! Don't be pesterin' de young gemmen dat way! Whah's yo' mannehs?"

Then the darky lifted his ragged hat and bowed with true negro politeness.

"Mawnin' to yo' bofe. I hope de dawg didn't 'starb yo'. Yo' come from de sea, I reckon? Mighty po' bed yo' been layin' on."

His kindly questions were but manifestations of his curiosity.

"A poor bed," Mat replied, "but better than none. You live somewhere here, do you?"

"Got a cabin, an' an ol' oman, an' some chil'ern, oveh yondah," indicating the direction with his hat.

Mat felt that he must have something to eat, as also did Phil, and they immediately asked the darky if he could furnish this.

"Ain't got much, boss," he apologized. "Cawn bread an' sweet taters; but you're sho' welcome to what I is got."

"We haven't anything to pay," Mat stated. "We had a little money, but it was all taken from us."

The negro's eyes rounded.

Seeing that an explanation was needed, Mat told him enough to satisfy his curiosity, and then the three set off for the cabin.

It was in the piney woods. There was a little truck patch near it, where the sweet potatoes had been grown, though not much else to indicate the manner in which the negro gained a livelihood.

Dogs and children swarmed—the dogs audaciously bold and the children shy and retiring.

A round, middle-aged negress bustled forward, to whom the boys were introduced, and when their wants had been stated, the best that the poor cabin afforded was placed at their disposal.

They ate ravenously, and talked as they ate, and from these new friends learned where they were.

It was a day's travel from there to the gypsy camp.

Fearing pursuit from Lee Bolton, the boys were anxious to push on, and when they had again and again thanked the kind-hearted negroes, they set out.

They felt much more comfortable, for, in addition to the meal they had received, their pockets now bulged with sweet potatoes and bread, and they had obtained some rags to tie over their heads, as a protection from the sun.

Nevertheless, they were two tattered and sorry-looking boys, as they trudged onward through the seemingly interminable forest.

Two or three times they went astray, and when night descended about them, they were not at all sure they were in the desired course.

The character of the country had materially changed. There were bits of marsh land and swampy spots. Finally, coming to a more elevated region, they ran squarely against a fence.

"We can't go any farther!" Mat asserted. "I'm going to climb this fence, and see if I can't find a place to lie down."

The gloom was already so great that they could not determine the character of the inclosure, though they were sure no house was near.

Therefore, they climbed over, and after stumbling about for a few moments, they came to some low mounds, and sank down on these, thoroughly exhausted.

CHAPTER XXV.

A STRANGE PILLOW.

When Mat and Phil awoke, they were astonished to find themselves in a graveyard.

Mat's head had rested all night against a grave, and a cry came from his lips as he read the inscription on the headstone.

These were the words cut into the small, marble slab:

"In Memory of
MATIO DUCRO,

Only Son of

IGNATIO DUCRO.

Died September 19, 18—, aged 2 years."

Certainly, this inscription was enough to startle him. What did it mean?

"I wish you'd come here, Phil!" called Mat, in an awed tone.

Phil hurried to his side, somewhat excited, and together they stared at the inscription.

A queer, superstitious look passed over the face of the gypsy boy.

He took his eyes from the gravestone and looked at Mat, in the same odd way.

"Are you sure that you are Matio Ducro, only son of Ignatio Ducro, as it says there?"

Mat started. This was a new suggestion. Could he be absolutely certain of his own identity? His thoughts whirled, and he put his hand to his head.

"If I'm not Matio Ducro, who am I?" was his singular query. "And yet, Matio Ducro was evidently buried there! And Matio Ducro, whose father was Ignatio Ducro! Could there have been two Matios and two Ignatios—son and father—bearing that uncommon name?"

He pointed a finger at the grave as he put the question.

Phil was too much puzzled to reply, and shook his head.

Fascinated by the mystery that seemed all at once to envelop

him, Mat Ducro sank down on the mound, and wonderingly read the inscription over and over.

He was trying to think—trying to get together the tangled threads of early recollection.

"No, I'm not absolutely sure that I'm Matio Ducro!" was his declaration, as he looked the gypsy boy in the face.

"I told you that I used to live at New Orleans. That was a long time ago, and I was only a little chap. I lived with an old German woman, who has been dead for some time, and I recollect that two or three times an old negro came to see me.

"Do you know, Phil," and his voice became more than ever awed, "I half believe that negro was nobody else but Johnsing Jones, the witch-doctor."

He put his hands to his head again, was silent for a minute, and then went on:

"I remember the German woman telling me afterward that until the negro man saw me, she did not know my name."

"I don't know where she got me—likely from some orphan asylum.

"Anyway, the negro saw me one day, and followed me into the house. He seemed to take a great interest in me, and he told her that my name was Matio Ducro, and that my father was named Ignatio Ducro. He said, too, that my father was dead.

"Part of this I remember, but the most of it the German woman told me. Of course, I never doubted it.

"When I was nearly ten years old, as well as I can recollect, she died, and I've been knocking about the world ever since, most of the time at sea.

"Now, am I Matio Ducro or not?"

He breathed hard, and the questioning light deepened in his eyes.

"You'll have to ask me something easier!" and Phil shook his head. "I should say not, unless there were two Matio Ducros. One of them died when he was a baby. Let's see, how old would he have been?"

"Just my age, if he'd lived till now!" Mat asserted, still more puzzled.

So fruitful was the subject, and so suggestive, that they began to examine other gravestones in the vicinity, and soon came to one erected over the grave of Ignatio Ducro.

According to the inscription on this, Ignatio had died a year earlier than the occupant of the other grave.

The boys could make nothing of it all, however, and were turning away, when there came footsteps to startle them.

Some one had entered the graveyard, and was hurrying toward them.

They looked up, to behold the colored girl, M'liss.

A highway ran near the fence, from which she had espied them, and she seemed to be advancing for the purpose of speaking to them.

The sight of the girl considerably astonished the boys, although they did not know exactly where they were, nor how far they had stumbled during the night.

Nor had they given much attention to the surrounding landscape, being so much engrossed by the mysterious headstones.

"Fo' de Lawd! I'se glad to see yo'!" M'liss exclaimed, as she hurried up. "Been wantin' to see yo' dis good while. Nebeh 'spected to fin' yo' heah!"

Though she had recognized them without great difficulty, she looked at them in wonder, for the change in their appearance was great.

"Been wantin' to see yo' dis long time," she repeated. "My paw is got sumpin mighty p'tick'lar to say to this young gem'-man. Sumpin dat'll tickle him to heah!"

She indicated Mat as she spoke.

"He tol' me fu'st time I see yo' to 'press on yo' dat yo' mus' come immejitly tch see 'im! I hopes yo' kin come now!"

Her manner was very earnest, even appealing.

Mat and Phil studied her face intently, half afraid that another trap was being set for them. But every lineament of it was filled with perfect honesty.

Observing their distrust, she reiterated her appeal.

"It's sumpin about some propety what Misteh Bolton's got his han's on, an' what b'longs by rights to dis young gem'-man! Sumpin like dat, is de contentment ob what my paw is gwine tch say tch him!"

"Sence Lee Bolton whup me in de woods, my paw ain't got no so't o' use feh him no mo', an' so he wants tch see yo', dat he may tell yo' sumpin monst'ous interestin' 'bout Bolton!"

Mat Ducro called her attention to the headstone over the grave. "Do you know anything about that? About the boy buried here?"

"My paw knows a good deal, I kin tell yo'! Marse Ignatio Ducro, dat boy's paw, was my paw's marsteh, 'fo' de wah. My paw knows a mighty sight 'bout ol' Marse Ignatio, I kin tell yo'!"

She shook her head solemnly.

"How far is it to your father's?" Phil questioned, at this juncture.

"Jis' ovah yondeh, th'ough dem woods. Dis is at de back o' de woods, so dat we won't hab teh cross de alligatoh bayou!"

Spurred on by her appealing injunction, Phil and Mat set out with her across the marsh land and through the woods to the home of the old witch-doctor.

They were anxious to reach the gypsy camp, and to consult with Mother Ferola; but what they had seen and heard made them equally anxious to again call on Johnsing Jones.

A walk of less than an hour's duration brought them in sight of the cabin and fence, which had held for them so much of excitement and peril during their previous visit.

The girl quietly lifted the latch of the gate, and let them into the garden. As she did so, angry voices reached them.

Phil and Mat started.

One of the voices was Mother Ferola's and the other was Lee Bolton's.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SAVAGE COMBAT.

"I am here, also, to see about that boy!" Mother Ferola was heard to declare. "You've been carrying things on with a very high hand, Lee Bolton!"

Her voice was high-pitched and angry.

Mat and Phil stopped in dismay, and M'liss did likewise.

None of the three had expected to find Lee Bolton in the witch-doctor's house, much less had they thought of finding Mother Ferola there.

The boys were about to retrace their way to a position of safety, when it suddenly occurred to Mat that, as the words spoken so nearly concerned him, it might be wise to know what was being said.

Thus thinking, he moved nearer the house, and under the protecting screen of a moss-hung live oak.

Phil and M'liss imitated his example, and thus the three stood, thrilled with the liveliest curiosity, not wholly unmixed with fear, eagerly drinking in Mother Ferola's statements.

It was quite evident that Lee Bolton had hastened to the witch-doctor's to see him about recapturing Mat Ducro, and Mother Ferola's words showed that her mission also concerned the boy.

"I tell you, Lee Bolton, you've got to drop this thing; and the sooner, the better it will be for you! I've had spies in New Orleans, and I know enough now to put you behind the bars. And if you get there once, you'll stay there the rest of your natural life!"

"Don't be a fool!" Bolton urged. "What's the boy to you? He and his property interests don't concern you!"

"They concern me so much that I tell you you must stop! I've got enough to answer for! So long as I thought the boy dead, I just let things slide. I'm not going to do it any longer!"

"But how do you know this is the same boy? Can you prove it?"

There was a sneer on his face as he said this.

"In several ways. He's enough like his father, for one thing. You've shown that you haven't had any doubts as to who he is! I can prove it, when it becomes necessary!"

Lee Bolton changed his tone.

"What's it worth to you, Mother Ferola, to keep your hands clear of the whole business? I guess that's what you're figuring for! Name it, and if it ain't too much, I'll pay it!"

At this, Mat's heart sank, but the boy was quickly reassured.

"It would be worth more than you could ever pay, Lee Bolton! I'm getting old enough to want to blot out some things I've done in the past. I harmed the boy enough once; now I'm going to help him! Of course, you know where he is?"

"You want me to lead you to him and lay his lily hand in yours? Well, I won't. And more than that, Mother Ferola, if you trouble me in this matter, you'll have a long time in which to wish you hadn't!"

His voice shook with anger.

At that moment, there came a bellow of rage from somewhere in the interior of the house.

The savage, animal-like sound came from the lungs of the enraged witch-doctor.

He had held for Lee Bolton the liveliest hate since the time M'liss had come home covered with cuts and bruises, and with the story of Bolton's attack on her.

Before that, the witch-doctor had been Bolton's pliant tool.

As M'liss had stated, the old voodooist was an ex-slave of Ignatio Ducro's, and knew the history of the Ducro family. Moreover, he had assisted Lee Bolton, and had been well paid by Bolton for his silence.

Now he was burning to avenge the wrong done M'liss.

With a furious bound, he leaped into the room occupied by Bolton and Mother Ferola.

He held in his right hand a huge rattlesnake, which he hurled at Bolton's head; and then, drawing a big knife, he followed this with a savage rush.

Mother Ferola screamed as the snake sped through the air, and dodged out of the room by the rear door.

Bolton shook the snake off, with a bitter curse, and turned to face the enraged negro.

The assault was an unpleasant surprise.

"What do you mean?" he vociferated.

"Take dat!" howled the witch-doctor, aiming a furious blow with the knife.

Bolton evaded the blow and stepped backward.

The snake, which had been hurled to the floor, was throwing itself into a coil, and commencing its angry rattle.

Again the witch-doctor advanced on Bolton, brandishing the knife, and Bolton reached for his revolver.

Neither of the excited men beheld the faces now looking through the doorway. Curiosity had overcome the fears of the boys, and they were peering in, while M'liss tiptoed closely behind them.

With a wild bound, the witch-doctor, who was as agile as a much younger man, leaped on Bolton, and struck the revolver to the floor.

At the same instant, he attempted to stab Bolton with the knife.

Bolton met this furious onslaught, and though somewhat unnerved by the loss of the pistol, he planted a blow between the witch-doctor's eyes, thus hurling him staggering backward.

Bolton was in mortal fear of the rattlesnake, which was now furiously sounding, and he would have retreated from the house had he been given opportunity.

But the witch-doctor, recovering from the effects of the blow, got between Bolton and the door, and again came forward with the uplifted knife.

Though M'liss desired to advance to her father's assistance, she was so petrified with fear that she was absolutely powerless.

She gurgled and gasped, rolled her eyes, and two or three times started forward; but her trembling limbs refused to do her bidding.

Mat and Phil were almost as much terrified, though in a different way.

Bolton had now no weapon except a big pocket knife, which he was trying to get at.

However, as the witch-doctor advanced, he lifted a chair and furiously struck with it.

The witch-doctor warded off the blow with his huge left arm. Then the glittering knife descended.

Bolton was badly hurt; but he lifted the chair again, and floored the witch-doctor with it.

That last was a most unfortunate blow for the old voodooist.

The chair hurled him backward against the rattlesnake, and quick as a flash, the venomous fangs sank into his leg.

A howl of fear and pain instantly followed.

The pang of the wound, and the terror it induced, almost congealed the blood in the old negro's veins.

With a savage cry, he shook off the snake, then leaped away and disappeared from view.

That aroused M'liss from her state of helplessness.

She saw what had occurred, and knew that her father was rushing to the woods to get a remedy for the snake bite.

The bruised leaves of a certain herb were believed by the witch-doctor to be potent in such cases.

Trembling and crying out in fright, the girl followed her father toward the woods.

The strength that had upheld Lee Bolton forsook him in that moment. He was badly wounded, and he dropped with a moan to the floor.

CHAPTER XXVII.

KNOTS UNTIED.

When they saw Lee Bolton drop down in that manner, their humanity urged the boys to run into the room and proffer him assistance.

Even though he was their enemy, Mat and Phil could not feel that it was right to stand there and not lift a hand to help him.

The rattlesnake, after striking the witch-doctor, had crawled away, as if dreading vengeance for the deed; and, although it was concealed somewhere in the room, the boys did not take time to search it out and dispatch it.

They turned their attention immediately to Lee Bolton, who had fallen in a writhing heap.

Mat rushed to him, and lifted his head, while Phil darted away to secure some water.

It needed but a glance into Bolton's face, with its deathly pallor and half-closed eyes, to tell the boys that his injuries were of a dangerous character.

As Mat lifted him, Bolton opened his eyes and stared into the face above him.

The sight of the boy restored him to full consciousness.

"You?" he whispered.

"Tell me what I can do for you?" Mat asked.

The blood was welling from a wound in Bolton's breast and dyeing his clothing.

"Nothing!" he said. "Let me die!"

Mother Ferola, who had been terribly frightened, but who had not left the place, came in at that moment, agitation showing in her countenance.

"Are you much hurt?" she asked, speaking to Bolton, after glancing questioningly at Mat.

"I'm a dead man!" Bolton avowed, lifting a feeble hand.

"That cursed witch—" He strove to lift himself, causing increased hemorrhage, and fell back gaspingly.

A look of alarm came into Mother Ferola's eyes.

"We must get him into a bed!" she declared, taking hold of his feet. "There's a cot over there!"

Phil came in, bringing some water in a tin cup, and she directed him to assist.

Bolton was not a lightweight; but between them they got him on the cot.

Then Mother Ferola made a hasty examination of the wound. Her face was very grave.

Lee Bolton looked at her anxiously.

She shook her head.

"You have only a short time to live, Lee Bolton. I'm enough of a doctor to know that. Only a few hours at the most."

"For Heaven's sake, then, get some pens and paper!" was his gasping exclamation, as he nodded toward the boy.

Mother Ferola understood him, and at once hastened away to make a search for writing materials.

She could find nothing of the sort on the place; but she came back, finally, with a quill pen, which she had made, and with some inky decoction she had found.

Mat was fanning Bolton, and both boys were much distressed. All the enmity they had ever held for the man had faded away.

Mother Ferola soaked some bandages in water, which she applied to the wound, and gave Bolton some water to drink.

This had the effect of reviving him, and, when he was propped up with the bed coverings, he perceptibly brightened, and talked for a time with much rationality.

He said he desired to make a confession, which Mother Ferola must take down, and that the confession concerned Mat Ducro and certain property which he had been withholding wrongfully from Mat.

It was a rambling and frequently interrupted story that Lee Bolton told, filled with much unnecessary detail. To present it in full would be unprofitable. Besides, many things were afterward made clear by Mother Ferola.

The statements of the captain of the *Southern Cross*, taken in connection with Mother Ferola's, showed that Bolton was a

nephew of Mat's father, Ignatio Ducro, and that at the death of Ignatio Mat was given into the possession of Bolton as Bolton's ward—Bolton promising to rear him carefully and hold the Ducro estate intact for him until the time of his majority.

The estate was worth nearly twenty thousand dollars; and so great was Ignatio's faith in Lee Bolton, that this immense property was turned over to Bolton without special formalities, or the bond usually thought necessary in such cases.

When he accepted the trust, Bolton's intentions were entirely honorable. After events overcame his scruples and made of him a villain.

Bolton placed the infant, Matio, in charge of a nurse in New Orleans.

He thought the nurse all she represented herself to be, and was deceived in her.

The nurse was a gypsy woman, and none other than the Mother Ferola of this story.

The gypsy woman purposely lost Mat, and substituted for him a half-blood gypsy boy, her grandchild, whom she desired to palm off on Bolton, that the boy might grow up as Ignatio's child and inherit the Ducro estate.

Bolton, however, when this child was brought to him, refused to be deceived.

Then Mother Ferola told him the other boy could not be found at which he declared that the property then became his, as he was the next of kin.

Matio was truly lost to all knowledge of the gypsy woman; and she, seeing that her scheme had failed, vanished, for a time, with the gypsy boy.

Bolton took possession of the Ducro estate, hoping Mat was dead; and, when years passed, he became almost certain he would never be disturbed.

Not sure that the boy was not living, he never rested in entire easiness, however; and the guilty feeling that preyed on his mind converted him by degrees into the villain which the reader has known.

When he discovered Mat, in the person of the boy who had rescued him from the lion, his fears arose with such startling force that he immediately began to plan how Mat might be kept from all knowledge of what had occurred.

His efforts in that line have been fully detailed. They were desperate and determined, even murderous, in their character; but they had failed.

And now, facing death, he desired to make restitution.

A kind Providence placed Mat in the path of Phil Darrow, thus leading him to Mother Ferola.

Mother Ferola knew the entire history of the case. She was aware, too, that the witch-doctor possessed similar information.

Disliking to move in the matter herself, she sent Mat to the witch-doctor, with what result has been seen.

The body buried in the grave marked with Mat's name was that of a child obtained from an orphan asylum and which Bolton professed, falsely, to believe to be the body of Ignatio's son.

And the half-blood gypsy boy was our cheery friend, and Mat's inseparable companion and ally, Phil Darrow!

What more is there to tell?

The potent herbs of the forest failed to save the witch-doctor from the effects of the rattlesnake's venom; and the knife of the voodooist had too well done its murderous work.

Mother Ferola put forth her utmost endeavors to undo the great wrong at which she had connived, even to entering the courts and testifying in Mat's behalf; and the Ducro estate became, without question, the property of Ignatio's son.

The Caucasian blood in Phil Darrow's veins redeemed him from a life of vagabondage; and Mat was not forgetful of this friend of his dark days.

Neither was he forgetful of any of the friends who had helped him when his condition was so utterly friendless.

To-day, one of the stanch and reliable business firms of New Orleans is that of Ducro & Darrow; and the heads of this firm are the heroes of this story, Mat and Phil.

THE END.

It was a tough proposition when Dan Dalton, only a boy in years, staked himself against the moneyed kings of Wall Street, and one that led to many exciting adventures. How the brave youth succeeded is splendidly narrated in No. 44, "The Boy Broker; or, Fighting the Financiers," by Paul Rand.

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